

FATE AND ~~FREE-WILL~~ ^{FREEDOM} IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

by

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Abstract

The thesis considers the eternal problem of fate and free-will as it applies in the *Mahābhārata*, the longest epic in any literature. In the Indian tradition the problem is explored in terms of whether human beings have any control over their own destiny and the world around them; or whether they are under the control of powers and forces beyond them.

Chapter 1 examines the Epic doctrine of karma, which in theory represents the ideal compromise solution for it accepts the importance of both determinism and free-will in the lot of the individual, viewed as an entity transmigrating through time. The chapter finds that it is not a solution which finds much favour with the *pravṛtti* or 'this worldly' side of Hinduism, which predominates in the *Mahābhārata*. From their standpoint, karma can all too easily seem just another term for the workings of inscrutable fate.

Chapter 2 examines the *Mahābhārata*'s views on predestination, the idea that the destiny of the individual is controlled from the beyond by a god or gods. After establishing the structure and nature of the Epic cosmos, the chapter considers the part played by gods and goddesses in the affairs of mortals and finds that three great Gods alone, Brahmā, Īiva, and Viṣṇu, can be considered to play a predetermining role in the triple-world, for they must for ever try to make good the deficiencies in their own creation. However, the degree of their predetermining intervention differs according to how they are conceived. In the theological sections the great Gods are conceived of as indeterminate essences that predetermine all actions; in the mythology and the legends, they are conceived of as thoroughly anthropomorphic beings who predetermine only the essential events in their desire to preserve the order of the triple-world. The freedom of mortals is thus restricted, instead of negated. Finally, the chapter examines the position of such personalised abstractions as the Placer, the Ordainer, and the Ruler, which play a very prominent part in the proceedings of the *Mahābhārata*. Whether, in any particular context, they are considered to be an independent force, an epithet of a great God, or impersonal fate thinly

veiled, they invariably play a much more thorough predetermining role in the affairs of the triple-world.

Chapter 3 considers the *Mahābhārata's* views on how the destiny of the individual is controlled from the beyond by the impersonal forces of fate and Time. After examining the difficulties of clearly distinguishing between personal and impersonal forces of control, the chapter considers the range of circumstances in which impersonal fate is cited as the causative force. It also emerges that fate is conceived in quite different ways. In some contexts it is inscrutable and purposeless, and in other contexts it assumes a moral dimension. Equally, in some contexts it is considered to be all-powerful and ineluctable, predetermining all events and actions; but elsewhere fate is a force that can be overcome or made favourable.

Chapter 4 considers the *Mahābhārata's* views pertaining to human free-will. The chapter examines: various 'compromise' answers offered, in which outside forces of control and individual freedom all play a part; the considerable importance attached to human effort and exertion; the means by which individuals can control their own destiny (sacrifice, *tapas*, knowledge and devotion); and the problem of individual responsibility.

Chapter 5 analyses the problem of fate and free-will in the most famous single component of the Epic, the *Bhagavadgītā*. The chapter argues that efforts to find the *Gītā's* answer to the problem are misguided for the *Gītā* offers various answers. The chapter does suggest what was the the favoured view of the *Gītā's* author, but argues that he effectively undermined this solution out of a desire to build up the position of his personal God, a vital component in the *Gītā's* answer to the contemporary crisis in the orthodox tradition.

The conclusion points to the great variety of solutions the *Mahābhārata* offers to this eternal problem, but emphasises that despite the fatalistic image of Hinduism, the *Mahābhārata* - for various important reasons - has as much, if not more, to say about the efficacy of human action and free-will.

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Introduction

The problem of fate or predestination versus free-will, providence versus chance, or determined versus open universe, or however the oppositions have been defined over the course of time, has been a considerable preoccupation of western thinkers. The problem itself may be briefly put as follows. There is an apparent contradiction between an entirely ordered and predictable universe (be that order due to fate, God, the stars, or scientific causation) in which the free-will of the individual can find no place; and a universe in which the free-will of the individual is unlimited, but all order and pattern is replaced by the meaningless play of chance.

The exact origins of the debate on this problem are obscure, but certainly ancient Greek thinkers had clearly formulated the oppositions by the fourth century B.C. The debate continued amongst Christian thinkers, though on somewhat different terms for they were more troubled by the intractable issue of our free will as opposed to God's foreknowledge that we will sin. In more recent times the oppositions of the problem have been continually redefined in seemingly ever more sophisticated and complex terms, that at times may even seem to dismiss the problem as a mere verbal misunderstanding.¹

While these erudite arguments may satisfy some philosophers and theologians, nevertheless for more ordinary mortals they hardly provide a psychologically comfortable solution to the simple and straightforward questions that provoked the whole debate and underlay it throughout. Do human beings have any control over their own destiny and the world around them; or are they under the control of powers, forces and circumstances beyond them? Is man completely dependent, controlled from the outside, or the architect of his own fortunes? Are human action and effort meaningful or futile?

Though the questions are simple, human perceptions about such questions as

1) P. Edwards and A. Pap, A Modern Introduction to Philosophy: readings from classical and contemporary sources, pp.2-10.

the destiny of the individual, human responsibility, the nature of the divine and our relationship to the divine, are all affected by the answers given. Thus the problem is central to man's endless attempt to understand and define existence, and to arrange his life accordingly. And this is why philosophically elegant solutions will never provide a satisfying solution for ordinary individuals.

Now, we must obviously beware 'finding' or manufacturing in other cultural traditions problems that really preoccupy our own; and it seems fair to say that the sophisticated philosophical treatment of these oppositions has been very much a western concern. However, the problem of the nature of human action, in all its ramifications, is one that has greatly absorbed Indian intellectual energies throughout the passing millenia. As Professor van Buitenen notes: 'The attention and deliberation devoted by Indian, especially Hindu, thinkers to the nature of actions, their components, their conditions, and their consequences are to the non-Indian student staggering. This phenomenon began with the earliest of the Vedas and has continued to this day.' Indeed, with Buddhists, Jainists, Ājīvikas, orthodox Hindus, and others all propounding their own formulas for karma, *dharma* and *mokṣa*, then it is no wonder that the question of human action was one of the most debated and divisive issues during the vast religious re-orientation which occurred between approximately 600 B.C. and 500 A.D. It will be noted that when, prior to the battle, Arjuna is at his wits end as to where his duty lay, Kṛṣṇa consoles him with the reflection: 'What is action? What is non-action? Herein even the sages are confounded.'²

And an important part of the general attention devoted to the nature of action was the perennial question of the meaningfulness and efficacy of human action, a question that has perhaps been of varying concern to most cultural traditions. The problem, though, was not formulated in such neat and tidy

1) J.A.B. van Buitenen (ed. and trans.), The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata, p.14.

2) *Kiṃ karma kimakarmeti kavayo apyatra mohitāḥ/
Tatte karma pravakṣyāmi ...// Bh.G. 4.16.*

Western terms as 'determinism' and 'free-will', but more in terms of man's capacity to freely choose, and by his own efforts to attain, a particular end - which can hardly be called anything else but the problem of free-will. The issue was particularly acute for the heterodox movements, concerned as they were with man's ability to pursue and attain through his own exertions the state of *mokṣa*, or 'liberation' from conditioned existence. Wandering ascetics at the time were actually classified into two broad groups depending on their doctrine of the efficacy of human action: the *kriyāvādins* (or *karmavādins*), who believed that human deeds did yield fruit and that human effort would lead to release from *saṃsāra*; and the *akriyāvādins*, for whom all human effort was fruitless, and who advised abstention from action.¹ However, in one way or another, the meaningfulness and efficacy of human action were conundrums that troubled Hindu thinkers, be they theologians or storytellers, just as much as their heterodox counterparts.

The degree and variety of Hindu concern is nowhere more evident than in those great compendiums of Hindu literature, the Epics. Indeed, exploration of the theme of human action is perhaps especially relevant to the setting of Epic literature. The great Epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, hold a special place in the religious literature of India to the extent that they tell a continuous and coherent story concerning the deeds of heroic human and divine figures. As such, the Epic narrators could hardly ignore the question of the effectiveness of human action. To take but one consideration, if the reader (or more correctly listener) is to accept the casting of the principal characters as great heroes, then they must feel that their actions do affect the course of

1) See L.O. Gomez, 'Some aspects of the free-will question in the Nikāyas', *Philosophy East and West*, vol.25 (1975), pp.203-19; also K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, pp.140-1, 261, 444-46, 469 and W.S. Karunaratne, 'Concepts of Freedom and Responsibility in Theravada Buddhism', *University of Ceylon Review*, vol.17 (1959), pp.76-77. Within these classifications there were of course many further differences on the degree (or the absence) of man's moral freedom.

events, and that they are in some way responsible for these events. If the characters are portrayed as mere marionettes at the mercy of forces beyond their control, they will not come across as convincing heroes. But equally, a character in total control of his destiny and environment may not make a convincing hero, for the path to heroism necessarily includes struggle and even suffering. Thus, for the Epic narrators the problem is difficult, and certainly unavoidable.

As well, what the *Mahābhārata* does have to say about the problem is arguably of considerable significance given its peculiarly special encyclopaedic nature; and the importance of the historical period in which it evolved. Perhaps van Buitenen - who surely has more right to speak than most - best describes the immense achievement that is the *Mahābhārata*. Accounting for why it came to be considered as the 'fifth Veda', he writes:

How, it may be reasonably asked, could a loose collection of epical cycles ever attain this high, though ambiguous, position? The answer is that *The Mahābhārata* became the founding library of Brahmin-Indian civilization. It is necessary to understand the epic as an encyclopaedia of that civilization: it includes the basic story of *Çakuntalā*, so beautifully embroidered by Kālidāsa in his drama of that name, as well as the basic story of *The Rāmāyaṇa*, which in the poetic voice of Vālmiki is itself the second great Indian epic. It includes history, legend, edification; religion and art; drama and morality. If an analogy were to be made to western culture, one would have to imagine something like the following: an *Iliad*, rather less tightly structured than it now is, incorporating an abbreviated version of *The Odyssey*, quite a bit of Hesiod, some adapted sequences from Herodotus, assimilated and distorted pre-Socratic fragments, Socrates by way of Plato by way of Plotinus, a fair proportion of the Gospels by way of moralizing stories, with the whole complex of 200,000 lines worked over, edited, polished, and versified in hexameters by successive waves of anonymous church fathers. In the Western tradition this seems incredible. In the Indian civilization *The Mahābhārata* is a fact.¹

For an Indian assessment of the *Mahābhārata*'s importance we may turn to the noted scholar Professor R.N. Dandekar, a joint editor of the Critical Edition itself.

But it is not only its size that entitles the *Mahābhārata* to the claim of uniqueness. Its contents too are unique in many respects. Even a casual

1) J.A.B. van Buitenen, 'The Indian Epic', in E.C. Dimock (ed.), The Literatures of India, p.53.

reader of the *Mahābhārata* would be struck by its essentially encyclopaedic character. Indeed, it may be said to be embodying almost all knowledge about Indian religion and mythology, law, ethics and philosophy, statecraft and art of war, and history and ethnology, which had been current in that epoch.¹

So long as we substitute the word Hindu for Indian, the assessment becomes more realistic. Perhaps less disputable is Dandekar's assessment of the appeal the *Mahābhārata* has come to exercise:

And the literary works, which have left an abiding imprint on the socio-religious life sponsored by Hinduism, are not so much the Veda as the popular epics. Even, among these popular epics, if there is any one single work which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of the life and thought of the Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influence, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the *Mahābhārata*, the great national epic of India. Men and women in India from one end of the country to the other, whether young or old, whether rich or poor, whether high or low, whether simple or sophisticated, still derive enlightenment, entertainment, inspiration, and guidance from the *Mahābhārata*. In times of stress and trial, the *Mahābhārata* has given consolation and brought a message of hope as much to an illiterate villager as to an experienced statesman. Indian writers, ancient and modern, have found in the stories of the great epic excellent vehicles for the expression of their creative genius. ... There is, indeed, no department of Indian life, public or private, which is not vitally influenced by the great epic. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the people of India have learnt to think and act in terms of the *Mahābhārata*.²

In brief, amongst all levels of society throughout the centuries, the *Mahābhārata* has achieved the position of being the most popular body of literature in the Hindu tradition.

Historically, the *Mahābhārata*, in the form that it takes in the Critical Edition, was compiled over a period of some eight centuries between about 400 B.C. to 400 A.D. The period saw the decline of the Vedic and Brahmanical faiths, the rise and decline of opposing heterodox faiths (notably Buddhism, Jainism and the Ājīvikas), the emergence of the caste system, the working out of the Hindu tradition in its developed form, the incursions of the Greeks, Scythians and Kushans, and the emergence of the first of the great all-Indian empires, the

1) 'The *Mahābhārata*: Origin and Growth', in R.N. Dandekar, Exercises in Indology, p.264.

2) Ibid., p.263.

Mauryans. While we should not expect that eight centuries of Indian civilisation have been put into this great 'book', nevertheless, for an understanding of Hindu views on the meaningfulness of human action, the *Mahābhārata* should be a profitable source; and one that as yet has scarcely been exploited.¹

These views, it should be noted, may well be biased towards the concerns of the predominantly brahmin caste and male redactors who gave the *Mahābhārata* its final form. But fortunately the *Mahābhārata*, as Winternitz notes, was too much of a popular work and was too important a literary concern for it to become the vehicle of such narrow and exclusive interests alone.²

We should add that for our purpose the text of the *Mahābhārata* is that of the Poona Critical Edition. Admittedly, the whole rationale of the Critical Edition, and by implication the very importance of the historical method for the study of the Hindu religious tradition, has been severely questioned by various scholars who would prefer to treat the *Mahābhārata* as something like a timeless myth in which all elements are to be treated as simultaneous and equally valid.³ Whatever value the results of this latter approach may yield, as a student of history I must necessarily adhere to the importance of explaining change through time, which is of course the distinctive characteristic of the historical discipline. From this point of view the importance of the Critical Edition which, according to its editor Sukthankar, merely aims 'to reconstruct the oldest form of the text which it is possible to reach, on the basis of the manuscript material available',⁴ is self-evident. In the final analysis, the Critical Edition

1) For an introductory survey, see J. Bruce Long, 'The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*', in W.D. O'Flaherty (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, pp.38-60.

2) M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol.1, pp.316-20.

3) See the exchange between M. Biarreau, ('Some more considerations about textual criticism' *Purāṇa*, vol.10 (1968), pt.2, 'The Story of Kārtavīrya without Reconstruction,' *Purāṇa*, vol. 12 (1970), pt.2) and V.M. Bedekar ('Principles of *Mahābhārata* textual criticism: the need for a restatement', *Purāṇa*, vol. 11 (1969), pt.2); and the discussion by J.A.B. van Buitenen (trans. and ed.), *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, pp.142-54.

4) V.S. Sukthankar, 'Prolegomena', *The Ādiparvan*, p.lxxxvi. (Italics in original.)

returns us to a text of about the 6th century A.D., and it thus forms an invaluable tool in studying changes and continuities to the Hindu tradition. This is not to say that the study of change within the Hindu tradition is easy, more especially given the notorious Indian lack of interest in chronology and any true historical dimension. But the difficulty of the task is no reason to downgrade or dismiss its importance.

Finally, it should be explained that all translations from the *Mahābhārata* are the authors. This is not to claim any special standing for them: far from it in fact, for I am no Sanskritist, and an excellent translation by van Buitenen exists for the first five of the eighteen *parvans* of the *Mahābhārata*. Besides the fact that there is no adequate translation at all for the remaining thirteen *parvans*, a post-graduate thesis is primarily an exercise, and part of the exercise in this sort of thesis should be preparing one's own translations. The intention throughout has been to translate the original Sanskrit as faithfully as possible within the bounds of rendering it into readable English. However, no doubt for the first five *parvans* the Epic bards would have appreciated much more some of van Buitenen's delightful turns of phrase. Where myths and legends have been summarised, the intention has again been to follow the wording and 'flavour' of the original as much as possible.

Chapter 1: Karma

The most prominent and noteworthy of the Indian theories concerning the nature of human action in all the post-Vedic Indian religious traditions is the doctrine of karma. In the *Mahābhārata*, if the doctrine of karma had in practice anything like the importance normally attributed to it by brahmin theologians and *gṛamaṇa* teachers, then the opposition between fate and free-will would prevent little to be troubled about. For theoretically, the doctrine of karma puts a person in charge of his own destiny; and allows the individual to have something of the order of the determined universe, and something of the freedom of the open universe.

The post-Vedic theory of karma, it is important to note, consists of two components between which there is no necessary connection. On the one hand, there is the doctrine of *samsāra*, or transmigration, an idea that appears with considerable frequency amongst world cultures.¹ On the other hand, there is the doctrine of karma or 'action', which in essence is the notion that all actions (good and bad) inexorably produce a consequent effect or 'fruit'; whether that 'fruit' is in terms of reward and punishment in this world, heaven and hell, or transmigration, is strictly speaking another matter. Essentially, karma is the idea of action and reaction, cause and effect, as applied to ethics.²

The origin and development of these two doctrines is largely unknown and very speculative.³ It is not until the early *Upaniṣads* that we see them come together to reveal the first glimpse of that 'magnificently logical'⁴ doctrine of karma which was to so preoccupy Indian religious philosophy and thought. The first form of the 'new' theory may be found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*;⁵ but even then it is presented

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- 1) See G. Obeyesekere, 'The Rebirth Eschatology and Its Transformations: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Buddhism' in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.137-47; 'Transmigration' in W. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol.12, pp. 425-440.
 - 2) See R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p.59; J. Miller, *Cosmic Vision of the Vedas*, p.151; E.W. Hopkins, 'Modifications of the Karma Doctrine', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol.xxvii (1906), p.582.
 - 3) W.D. O'Flaherty, 'Introduction' in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.xii-xviii.
 - 4) A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India*, p.242.
 - 5) A.B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upaniṣads*, vol.2, pp.570-81.

in a way that would suggest that it was still tentative, secretive and largely unknown. In this *Upaniṣad*, the sage Yājñavalkya is asked by his friend Ārtabhāga what survives when the constituent parts of the microcosmic body return to their macrocosmic counterparts. Yājñavalkya explains:

'Ārtabhāga, (my) good (friend), take my hand. We two alone must know of this; this is not for us two (to discuss) in public.' The two of them went forth (and) deliberated. (And) what they spoke of was karma (action); (and) then what they praised was karma (action): 'One becomes good by good (action), evil by evil (action).'¹

In a subsequent passage Yājñavalkya describes the departure of the soul from the body and further explains this 'new' doctrine and its consequences for the individual:

The point of his heart begins to shine, (and) by this light the soul (*ātman*) departs out of the eye or out of the head or out of other parts of the body. (And) the life breath (*prāṇa*) comes out after the departing (soul). He (the soul) becomes endowed with intelligence. What is intelligence departs (with him) too. His knowledge and his actions and his former intelligence remain clasped to him (the soul). Now, as a grass-leech, having reached the end of a blade of grass, draws itself together as it begins another crossing over (to a new blade of grass), even so, this soul, having struck down the body and dispelled its ignorance, draws itself together as it begins another crossing over (to a new body). ... As one acts, as one lives, so does one become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One (becomes) virtuous by virtuous action, evil by evil (action).²

In later *Upaniṣads* and the subsequent Hindu tradition, these doctrines are elaborated with much detail and even greater variety, all of which makes talking of a single theory of karma quite fatuous. Nevertheless, behind all the permutations, the simple logic of these new doctrines remains: every individual, in the course of successive existences, reaps the 'fruit' of his own actions performed in previous

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- 1) Āhara somya hastamārtabhāga/ Āvāmevaitasya vediṣyāvo na navetatsajana iti/ Tau hotkramya mantrayāñcakrāte/ Tau ha yadūcatuḥ karma haiva tadūcatuḥ/ Atha yatpraçaṇsatuḥ karma haiva tatpraçaṇsatuḥ/ Puṇyo vai puṇyena karmaṇā bhavati pāpaḥ pāpeneti/ Tato ha jāratkārava ārtabhāga upararāma// Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, 3.2.13.
 - 2) Tasya haitasya hrdayasyāgraṃ pradyotate/ Tena pradyotenaiṣa ātmā niṣkrāmati cakṣuṣṭo vā mūrdhno vā anyebhyo vā çarīradeçebhyaḥ/ Tamutkrāmantaṃ prāṇo anūtkrāmati/ Saviṣṭhāno bhavati/ Saviṣṭhānamevānvavakrāmati/ Taṃ vidyākarmaṇi samanvārabhete pūrvaprajñā ca// Tadyathā tṛṇajalāyukā tṛṇasyāntaṃ gatvā anyamākramamākrāmā ātmānamupasaṃharati/ Evamevāyamātmedaṃ çarīraṃ nihatyāvidyāṃ gamayitvā anyamākramamākrāmā ātmānamupasaṃharati// ... Yathākārī yathāçārī tathā bhavati/ Sādhukārī sādhubhavadati/ Pāpakārī pāpo bhavati/ Puṇyaḥ puṇyena karmaṇā pāpaḥ pāpena/ ... *Ibid.*, 4.4.2-5.

existences. As a person desires, so does he act, and as he acts so does he incur or store up consequences that must come to fruition in future existences. The distinctive feature in this law of karma is the strict connection between act and consequence. As the term *phala* (literally 'fruit') implies, the act is the seed which must inexorably germinate and produce the fruit appropriate to that seed (or act).'

According to the doctrine of karma, then, what happens to an individual in this life is determined by what the individual has done in previous lives. To this extent, the doctrine of karma veers towards the fatalistic side of the two oppositions. But the doctrine of karma does not preclude the notion of free-will;² for what will happen to the individual in future lives is being determined by what is done in this life. To this extent, then, the doctrine of karma veers towards the free-will side of the oppositions. Therefore, the actions of an individual in this life are meaningful and significant. The karma theory, as one author put it, looks upon the individual as a 'self-adjusting moral mechanism'.³ Logically, responsibility for action and its consequences should lie with the doer and the doer only; man alone, viewed as an entity transmigrating through time, is the arbiter of his own destiny. And thus he is, and should feel, free from subjection to all outside forces that are beyond his control.

The doctrine of karma, therefore, has the potential to provide a tidy and logically satisfying solution for the problem of fate, predestination and free-will. But to what extent is the potential fulfilled in the *Mahābhārata*? Before considering

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- 1) Such agricultural analogies are used by the Yoga school of philosophy to explain the mechanics of transmigration and karma to the ordinary person. See K. Potter, 'The Karma Theory and Its Interpretation in Some Indian Philosophical Systems', in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.245-48.
 - 2) As Fürer-Haimendorf points out: 'There is a deeply ingrained feeling that an individual's conduct in this life affects his fate in future existences. ... The theory of karman presupposes man's moral responsibility for each of his actions and hence the freedom of moral choice.' C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, 'The Sense of Sin in Cross-cultural Perspective', *Man* (n.s.), vol.9 (1974), p.549; also T.G. Kalghatgi, 'Determinism and Karma Theory', *Indian Philosophical Annual*, vol.4 (1968), pp.21-27.
 - 3) Hopkins, *op.cit.*, p.582.

this question we must first analyse what exactly the *Mahābhārata* does have to say about karma and *samsāra*.

The *Mahābhārata* has seemingly much to say about almost everything; and indeed its recounter Vaiṣampāyana proudly boasts: 'O Bull among Bhāratas, what is (found) here on Duty, on Profit, on Pleasure, and on Salvation, that is (found) elsewhere. (But) what is not here, that is nowhere else.' However, when it comes to explaining in any detail the actual mechanics of how karma and *samsāra* work, the *Mahābhārata* has much less to say than might be expected. In the huge bulk of the text there are only a handful of attempts to explain in any detail the workings of this all-important theory.

Probably the earliest of these explanations, and certainly the most distinctively different, is to be found in the *Uttarayāyāta* section of the *Ādiparvan*. What makes the *Uttarayāyāta* so different is that all the participants are *kṣatriyas*. In the other accounts the teachers and the listeners are all from the background of the specialist brahmin priesthood. As this distinction seems to have a very marked effect on the style, content and purpose of the teachings, it calls for some comment.

This is not to suggest, as some earlier writers did,² that there was in ancient India a separate *kṣatriya* wisdom from which these ideas emanated. While the Epic does provide not inconsiderable evidence of a possibly earlier period of rivalry between brahmins and *kṣatriyas*,³ nevertheless, the overall impression of the *Mahābhārata* is that of amity and not enmity. There was more to be gained through

1) Dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bhāratarṣabha/

Yadihāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tatkvacit// *Ādiparvan*, 56.33.

2) See, for instance, H. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol.1, pp.230-1.

3) See the various accounts of Rāma Jāmadagnya's repeated destruction of the *kṣatriya* class (*Sabhāparvan*, 115-117, *Çāntiparvan*, 49.); the account of Aurva's birth and his desire to destroy all *kṣatriyas* (*Ādiparvan*, 169-171); and the great battle between Rāma Jāmadagnya and Bhīṣma (*Udyogaparvan*, 178-187).

cooperation than hostility, and this the *Mahābhārata* often pointedly argues.¹ However, the Epic material does suggest an important division that has also been seen in the earlier Vedic period.² This is the division between the ruler's court with its entourage of court brahmins or *purohitas*, reinforced by village brahmins, and a brahmin elite who were highly specialised experts in the complicated and esoteric knowledge required for the really grand and extravagant *ṣrauta* rituals such as the *rājasūya*, *āṣvamedha*, and *vājapeya* sacrifices.³

It is no doubt these latter brahmins who are the target of King Jarāsaṃdha's caustic sounding remark that 'The heroism of the brahmin is especially in his speech.'⁴ And on the few occasions the grand *ṣrauta* sacrifices are celebrated in the *Mahābhārata*, we find not just these brahmins as the priestly performers but many others collected on the sides arguing over their specialty, the minutiae of the ritual; and waiting for a share of the lavish hospitality and munificent rewards distributed by the *kṣatriya* patrons.⁵

This, in itself, would suggest that these brahmin specialists had at best a loose or only occasional association with a particular court. For much of the time they were peripatetic, or on tour of the courts offering their specialised knowledge in return for patronage. This is not to suggest that they were hawkers of their sacrificial skills; for it is a common feature in the *Mahābhārata* for a king, desirous of some particular purpose, to send for or seek out a brahmin with the sacrificial skills believed capable of achieving his purpose.⁶ It may also be reasonably assumed that this specialised knowledge went quite over the heads of the ruler and his entourage of *kṣatriyas* and court brahmins; and this may account for

1) e.g. *Ādiparvan*, 159.15-21, *Çāntiparvan*, 74.28-32, 75.20-22.

2) See Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.291-2; and J.A.B. van Buitenen, 'Some Notes on the *Uttarayāyāta*', *Adyar Library Bulletin*, vol.31-32 (1967-68), pp.632-3.

3) By contrast with this limited circle, other brahmins followed a wide diversity of activities. See *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 90.6-10.,

4) *vāci vīryam ca brāhmaṇasya viṣeṣataḥ*, *Sabhāparvan*, 19.42.

5) e.g. *Ibid.*, 33.1-7, *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, 87.1.

6) e.g. *Ādiparvan*, 3.10-18.

the scant appearance of kings in the *Brāhmaṇas*, those monumental pieces of brahmin liturgy.' *Kṣatriya* interest in the sacrifice was strictly on the results and not on the procedure and means.

However, it may be surmised, these reservations no longer applied when brahmin speculations wandered beyond the complexities of the sacrifice, and into such areas as the nature of human action and the afterlife. When faith in the certainties of the rewards of the Vedic heaven began to wane, and new ideas concerning transmigration and karma (whatever their exact source) began to be aired, it could be expected that *kṣatriyas* had every reason to be as concerned about such matters as the brahmin priests. Indeed, if conduct really did determine their future life, they may have had even more reason. It is in the *Upaniṣads* that we find the earliest of the brahmin speculations on these new concerns; but the *Upaniṣads* were and remained brahmin texts for distribution within a very limited circle.

Understandably the concerns of the *kṣatriya* ruler and his entourage were very much a day-to-day matter. They did not have the same interest in systematising and passing on their speculations. Nevertheless, as van Buitenen puts it, 'it can be safely assumed that there existed a thriving oral literature which raised the same questions and provided the same answers, but to a different audience and in a different style.'² This literature must have been told and retold by the *sūta*'s or bards of the king's court; in other words, the very people responsible for the transmission of so much of the material in the Epics.

It is against this background that we may consider the significance of the *Uttarayāyāta*, which chronologically is probably the earliest of the *Mahābhārata*'s attempts to explain the new ideas of karma and *saṃsāra*; for various sections in the *Uttarayāyāta* bear comparison with the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, the earliest orthodox Hindu texts to discuss the notions. However, besides these stray

1) van Buitenen, 'Some Notes on the Uttarayāyāta' *op.cit.*, pp.632-3.

2) *Ibid.*, pp.633-4.

hints in the *Upaniṣads*, the *Uttarayāyāta* would seem to be the only representative survivor of what van Buitenen has referred to as 'a kind of bardic counterpart to the Brahmanic *Upaniṣads*.'¹

The very setting of the *Uttarayāyāta* would suggest its origins in the courts of the *kṣatriya* rulers. Yayāti is a king who is mentioned in passing in the *Ṛg Veda* as the son of Nahuṣa and as a patron of sacrifice.² But in the genealogies of the *Ādiparvan* his importance is much increased, and in the lengthy *Yayātyupākhyāna* it is recounted how he is eighth in line from Dakṣa himself. On his two wives Devayānī and Çarmiṣṭhā he begets five sons - Yadu, Turvaçu, Druhyu, Anu and Pūru - each of whom originates one of the famous Five Nations.³ After a long and duly prosperous reign Yayāti places his youngest and most obedient son, Pūru, on the throne and retires to the forest. The Bhāratas are the descendants of this Pūru.

In the forest, King Yayāti practices awesome austerities, restrains his senses, satisfies the gods and ancestors, and observes all the sacrificial requirements. Then, having covered heaven and earth with the fame of his virtue (*puṇyakīrtis*), he went to heaven where he was honoured by all the gods and lived for a long time.⁴ But where once Yayāti might have expected to stay on in heaven, this is not to be his fate, for he is cast from heaven for pride. Asked by Indra, himself the vainest of gods, whether anyone was his equal in austerities (*tulyatapasā*), Yayāti forthrightly replies that none was his equal, neither amongst gods, *ṛṣis*, *gandharvas* nor men. For this contempt of his equals and betters (*avamañsthāḥ sadṛçaḥ çreyasaçca*), he is condemned to fall that very day, his merit gone (*kṣīṇe puṇye patitāsyadya*). Yayāti begs a boon that he at least fall in the midst of the righteous and this is granted.⁵

Yayāti falls amongst four of his fellow kings - Aṣṭaka, Pratardana, Vasumanas,

1) *Ibid.*, p.634.

2) A.B. Keith and A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, vol.2, p.187.

3) *Ādiparvan*, 80.26-27.

4) *Ibid.*, 81.1 - 82.2.

5) *Ibid.*, 83.1 - 4.

and Çibi - who, it turns out at the end, are in fact his grandsons.¹ Yayāti is questioned by Aṣṭaka as to his experiences, and there follows the brief but tightly woven text called the *Uttarayāyāta*, in which the facts of transmigration are described.²

All the discussants, it should be reiterated, are kings; there are no brahmins present, and there is no suggestion that these *kṣatriyas* felt the need for any brāhmanical guidance. Equally, the account of transmigration, primitive though the ideas may at times seem, is described in the first person by one who, having experienced the fall from heaven, is now about to go through it. The whole approach is much more typical of the dramatising qualities of the courtly bard, than the more impersonal and abstract style of the brahmin redactors.

Aṣṭaka begins the discourse by asking Yayāti why he had foresaken the pleasures of heaven to come back to earth. Yayāti explains in cynical tones that once one's merit is used up the god's abandon one, just as family and friends abandon the person whose wealth has gone.

Aṣṭaka asks how does one use up one's merit? And where does the man abandoned by the gods go to? It is the second question that Yayāti picks up and explains - in tones very different to the *joi-de-vivre* of the Vedic seers³ - that they return to this hell-that-is-earth, there to be born again and to be ripped apart again at death by predatory scavengers: 'O god among men, lamenting (much) they all fall to this hell-that-is-earth. Their (merit) exhausted, they increase manyfold, for the sake of food for crows, jackals and herons.'⁴ Yayāti then connects the importance

1) *Ibid.*, 88.21.

2) By origin the *Uttarayāyāta* would seem to be an independent and self-contained text which was most probably added to the *Yayātyupākhyāna* because of the common identity of their heroes, Yayāti. The metre (mostly *trṣṭubh*) is different, the style is very different, and the subject matter is entirely new and bares no relationship to anything in the *Yayātyupākhyāna*. See van Buitenen, 'Some Notes on the *Uttarayāyāta*' *op.cit.*, p.617-18.

3) See Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.17-19; and E.W. Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.1-44.

4) *Imaṃ bhaumaṃ narakam te patanti*

lālapyamānā naradeva sarve/

Te kaṅkagomāyubalāṣanārtham

kṣīṇā vivṛddhiṃ bahudhā vrajanti// Ādiparvan, 85.4.

of acts to one's future lot. 'Therefore', he warns, 'a man should avoid in this world those tainted acts that are reprehensible.'

All this is news to Aṣṭaka, and with some evident confusion he asks: 'But when the birds, the white-necked vultures and insects have torn them apart, what is their state, how do they arise again? I have not heard of this other earth that is hell.'² Yayāti explains that after leaving their bodies (*ūrdhvaṃ dehāt*) they spend 60 or 80 thousand years in heaven (*vyomni*) before they again fall to this hell-that-is-earth for many multitudes of years (*varṣapūgānanekān*). But significantly Yayāti adds that they pass along to the earth again (*prthivyāmanusaṃcaranti*) because of their yawning or unfolding acts (*karmaṇo jṛmbhamāpād*).³ The idea is not entirely clear, but the assumption seems to be that the fruit of meritorious acts which are deserving of heaven are harvested in heaven, while the fruit of one's remaining acts come to fruition by rebirth in the hell-that-is-earth. Once one's heavenly merit is exhausted, the remaining accumulated acts begin to 'yawn open' or unfold, requiring rebirth where their consequences may be satisfied.

Aṣṭaka remains perplexed and unsure about this novel notion of rebirth, and enquires further. When they are pushed from heaven, he asks, 'What is their state? How do they arise again? How do (human) beings (again) become a being in the womb?'⁴ In enigmatic language, Yayāti explains:

A 'tear', clinging to a fruit or a flower, goes along with the semen that is poured forth by the man; indeed, it falls into the (fertile) field of the woman, and there establishes itself as the embryo (lit. 'being in the womb'). They enter the trees of the forest, the herbs, the water, wind, and earth and

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- 1) Tasmādetadvarjanīyaṃ nareṇa
duṣṭaṃ loke garhaṇīyaṃ ca karma/ *ibid.*, 85.5.
 - 2) Yadā tu tānvitudante vayāṃsi
tathā grdhrāḥ cītikanṭhāḥ patamgāḥ/
Kathaṃ bhavanti kathamābhavanti
na bhaumamanyaṃ narakam cṛṇomi// *ibid.*, 85.6.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, 85.7. The root *jṛmbh* has the sense: to open the mouth, yawn; to gape open; spread, increase; to unfold. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p.424.
 - 4) Kathaṃ bhavanti kathamābhavanti
kathaṃ bhūtā garbhabhūtā bhavanti// *ibid.*, 85.9. Amending Critical Edition kathambhūtā (lit. 'of what kind?') to kathaṃ bhūtā. Kathambhūtā is quite meaningless.

sky; and thereupon all the two-footed and four-footed (creation). Thus do those who have been become embryos.'

While at first glance strange, the sense is quite apparent when set beside the comparable idea in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*² where it is described how the souls, on their downward path, become mist (*abhra*), and then they become the rain cloud (*megha*), and 'having become a cloud, it rains. They are here (on earth) born as rice and barley, as herbs and trees, as sesamum and beans. From these, verily, the departure is very difficult. Now, if a man eats that as his food, if he then emits his sperm, then he (the 'soul') becomes once more.'³ Obviously the 'tear' (*asra*) of our verse refers to the tear-like shape of the fresh raindrop as it clings to the fruit or flower. And the first part of the second verse makes eminent sense if they return as rain.

Aṣṭaka, uncertain still, asks if the transmigrating being transmigrates with its former physical form or takes on a new one; a question which suggests belief in the idea of a permanent transmigrating 'subtle body': 'Does the embryo, entering this human womb, take on another form, or does it go on with its own body? Tell me, I speak from uncertainty. By which way does it acquire the growth of bones, body and so forth, and sight, hearing and consciousness?'⁴ Yayāti explains:

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- 1) Asraṃ retaḥ puṣpaphalānuprṛkta-
 manveti tadvai puruṣeṇa sṛṣṭam/
 Sa vai tasyā raja āpadyate vai
 sa garbhabhūtaḥ samupaiti tatra//
 Vanaspatīṅṅcauṣadhīccāviṣanti
 apo vāyurṇ prthivīm cāntarikṣam/
 Catuṣpadaṃ dvipadaṃ cāpi sarva-

 mevaṃ bhūtā garbhabhūtā bhavanti// Ādiparvan, 85.10-11.

Again the Critical Edition evaṃbhūtā (lit. 'of such a nature, 'such a one'), which makes no sense, should be amended to evaṃ bhūtā, which makes much sense.

- 2) See *Chāndogyaopaniṣad*, 5.10.6. Intriguingly this *Upaniṣad* also suggests the idea is derived from non-brāhmaṇic origins: 'This knowledge has not yet gone to the brahmins before you.' *īyaṃ na prāktvattaḥ purā vidyā brāhmaṇān*, *ibid.*, 5.3.7.
- 3) *megho bhūtvā pravarṣati, ta iha vrīhiyavā oṣadhi vanaspatayastilamāṣā iti jāyante, ato vai khalu durniṣprapataṛaṃ yo yo hyannamatti yo retaḥ siñcati, tadbhūya eva bhavati*, *ibid.*, 5.10.6.
- 4) *Anyadvapurvidadhātīha garbha*
 utāho svitsvena kāmena yāti/
 Āpadyamāno narayonimetā-
 mācakṣva me saṃṣayātpṛabravīmi//
 Ārīradehādīsamucchrayaṃ ca

At the (woman's fertile) season, the vital breath draws up into the embryo's womb (along with) the semen, mixed with the juice of flowers. There it superintends the work of the undifferentiated elements (of the embryo), (and) in due course, causes the embryo to grow here. A man, his limbs separated out, is born as the abode where the six senses are established. He experiences sound with his ears, and he sees all forms with his eyes. With his nose he knows smell, with his tongue taste, with his skin touch, and with his mind thought.'

Yayāti's *vāyuh* or 'vital breath' is most probably the *prāṇa* which in some later Hindu philosophical systems transmigrates with the soul. Here, too, it accompanies the 'tear-drop' which, mixed with the *puṣparasa* or 'juice of flowers', enters the sperm. There these transmigrating factors bring about the development and growth of the new physical form of the embryo. Presumably the other undeveloped components that make up the new form are derived from the mother, or the parents jointly.

Aṣṭaka then, not unreasonably, asks if the new being knows the former being. But Yayāti is oblivious to the question and finishes his eschatological discourse with a renewed emphasis on the importance of karma, i.e. the deeds of this life determine the future lot of the transmigrating self:

Having left behind his life, like a man asleep, having sighed (his last), having placed before him his good and evil deeds, he follows after the breath to another womb. Having abandoned his body, he enjoys (another), O lion among kings. Doers of virtue go to a virtuous womb; doers of evil go to an evil womb. The evil become worms and insects; I do not wish to speak (of them), O powerful one. Four-footed, two-footed, and six-footed - thus those who have been become embryos. This has all been told in its entirety.²

cakṣuḥçrotre labhate kena saṃjñāṃ/ *ibid.*, 85.12-13.

- 1) Vāyuh samutkarṣati garbhayoni-
 mṛtau retah puṣparasānuprktam/
 Sa tatra tanmātrakṛtādhikārah
 krameṇa saṃvardhayatīha garbham//
 Sa jāyamāno vigrhītagātrah
 ṣaḍjñānaniṣṭhāyatano manuṣyah/
 Sa çrotarābhyām vedayatīha çabdam
 sarvaṃ rūpaṃ paçyati cakṣuṣā ca//
 Ghrāṇena gandhaṃ jihvayātho rasaṃ ca
 tvacā sparçaṃ manasā veda bhāvam/ *ibid.*, 85.14-16.
- 2) Hitvā so asūnsuptavanniṣṭānitvā
 purodhāya sukṛtaṃ duṣkṛtaṃ ca/
 Anyām yoniṃ pavanāgrānusārī
 hitvā dehaṃ bhajate rājesīṇha//
 Puṇyām yoniṃ puṇyākṛto vrajanti
 pāpām yoniṃ pāpakṛto vrajanti/
 Kīṭāḥ patamgāçca bhavanti pāpā
 na me vivakṣāsti mahānubhāva//

Sukthankar, the editor of the *Ādiparvan*, has referred to this eschatological discourse between Yayāti and Aṣṭaka as 'in most part most obscure and incoherent, and so clumsily worded as to be almost unintelligible.'¹ On first reading Sukthankar's strictures are at least understandable, but on closer reading they are not supportable. What we have here is a primitive but quite intelligible account of transmigration, which blends the birth and death of beings into the perceived and readily observable cycles or processes of nature. The whole account - as indeed do the comparable accounts in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* and the *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* - presupposes some very early belief that conception occurred through the eating by a parent of a fruit or vegetable which contained the essential being or soul of the offspring. Indeed, it is in the very nature of these primitive and naturalistic ideas that much of the appeal of Yayāti's discourse lies.

These ideas also offer support for those who argue for a 'tribal' and non-Hindu origin for at least the idea of metempsychosis;² though tribal, as van Buitenen cautions, may merely be another way of saying that we do not know.³ Nevertheless, it might be suggested that the concern we see in the later Vedic literature with death, and more significantly 'repeated death' (*punarṃṛtyu*)⁴ may have made the orthodox tradition more responsive to pre-existing 'tribal' ideas of metempsychosis.

However, while the *Uttarayāyāta* is an intelligible account of transmigration, it is far less satisfactory as an account of karma. According to Yayāti the good are reborn in good wombs and the bad in bad wombs. But given this naturalistic interpretation of transmigration, how is this determined? For if the dead return to the earth and rebirth in the form of raindrops, one obvious difficulty is that rain

Catuṣpadā dvipadāḥ ṣaṭpadāḥ ca
tathābhūtā garbhabhūtā bhavanti//

Ākhyātametannikhilena sarvaṃ ...

ibid., 85.18-20.

1) V.S. Sukthankar, *The Ādiparvan*, p.992.

2) Obeyesekere, *op.cit.*, pp.137-8. The suggestion in the *Uttarayāyāta* of disposal of the dead by exposure is also a very non-Hindu and non-Vedic feature.

3) J.A.B. van Buitenen, 'Vedic and Upaniṣadic Bases of Indian Civilisation,' in J.W. Elder (ed.), *Chapters in Indian Civilisation*, pp.29-30; O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.xiii.

4) See O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.3-5; and Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.572-3.

has the habit of ending up in all sorts of awkward and inaccessible places. If the raindrop does manage to attach itself to something edible, then who or what should eat this food is obviously very important. Clearly rebirth according to this naturalistic cycle was a chancy business fraught with all sorts of accidental possibilities. This, of course, was of little significance - so long as the ethical notions of karma were not attached to it. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that we have here the satisfactory grafting of ideas of transmigration onto the Vedic heaven centred view, but the not very satisfactory grafting of ethical notions of karma onto a pre-existing, and non-ethical theory of transmigration. If the *Uttarayāyāta* suggests a 'tribal' origin for the theory of transmigration, there is no suggestion as to where the idea of karma, with its strict connection between act and consequence, comes from.

Such anomalies may not have unduly worried a king and his courtly advisers; but we may assume they troubled the real religious and cultural leaders of orthodox society - the specialised brahmin elite. While the king and his court were busy with their discussions of these eschatological conundrums, the brahmin intelligentsia were busy discussing and formulating their own 'tidier' solutions. Given the much greater brahmin interest in handing on their knowledge, it is to be expected that the *Mahābhārata* would principally transmit their views. But, as we shall see, what does occasion surprise is how little the *Mahābhārata* has to say on the detailed workings of the doctrines of *samsāra* and karma, given their purported significance for the Hindu tradition.

This, it should be added, cannot be explained by lack of opportunity. The *Mahābhārata* has grown to its current encyclopaedic proportions by the insertion into the essential story-line of a vast array of didactic discourses, myths, fables, and stories on a wide range of ethico-religious topics. Many of these, particularly those concerning the nature and destiny of man, are worked in at points of particular distress, misfortune and discordance, and there is no shortage of these in the *Mahābhārata*. Given this, it might have been expected that much greater efforts

would have been made to work in detailed teachings on *sāṃsara* and karma. Intellectually they are no more demanding on the listener than some of the other issues broached in greater detail. In fact, at only four points are detailed teachings concerning these doctrines introduced; twice in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, once in the *Çāntiparvan* and once in the *Āçvamedhikaparvan*.

It is Yudhiṣṭhira's grief at the uneven fortunes of the Pāṇḍavas, his feelings of guilt over his own responsibility for events, and his despair at the enormity of the destruction wrought that provides the opportunity for many of the didactic teachings in the *Mahābhārata*. Invariably at such points some great ṛṣi, deity or elder comes forth to provide a comforting teaching, or appropriate myth or story.

At one low point during the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the forest, the great ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya provides a lengthy discourse on a considerable range of ethical and religious issues,¹ which includes a detailed section on karma and *samsāra*. Interestingly, it is Yudhiṣṭhira himself who invites the teaching on karma and transmigration by asking a series of questions on the nature of human acts, and the forces that influence them.

In glum mood Yudhiṣṭhira reflects:

Seeing myself fallen from happiness, and beholding the evil Dhārtarāṣṭras prospering in every way, I have the thought (that) man is the doer of action, both good and evil, (and) that he enjoys his own fruit; (but, if this is so) how, pray, is the Lord the actor? Do the acts of men, in happiness and suffering, O best of knowers of *Brahman*, follow them in this life, or in another body? And the embodied (man) who has abandoned his body and is pursued by (his) good and evil (deeds), how is he joined with them - after dying or here (in this life), O best of the twice-born? (Are acts) of this world (only), or of the next world (too)? (And) where do (his) acts abide when a being is dead, O Bhārgava?²

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 179-221.

2) Bhavatyeva hi me buddhirdrṣṭvātmānaṃ sukhāccyutam/
Dhārtarāṣṭrāṇḥ ca durvṛttāṇṛdhyataḥ prekṣya sarvaçaḥ//
Karmaṇaḥ puruṣaḥ kartā çubhasyāpyaçuḥhasya ca/
Svaphalaṃ tadupāçnāti kathaṃ kartā svidiçvaraḥ//
Atha vā sukhaduḥkheṣu nṛṇāṃ brahmavidāṃ vara/
Iha vā kṛtamānveti paradehe atha vā punaḥ//
Dehī ca dehaṃ saṃtyajya mṛgyamāṇaḥ çubhāçuḥbhaiḥ/
Kathaṃ saṃyujyate pretya iha vā dviçasattama//
Ahalaukikamevaitadutāho pāralaukikam/
Kva ca karmāṇi tiṣṭhanti jantoḥ pretasya bhārgava// *ibid.*, 181.4-8.

Mārkaṇḍeya begins at the beginning by outlining the 'history' of mankind. He recounts how Prajāpati, the Lord of Creatures, created beings who were pure and virtuous, and thus freed of the normal limitations and sufferings of existence in a human body. Presumably, at this time karma was a system of reward only, and not of retribution as well:

The Lord of Creatures, having arisen before, created pure and unsullied bodies, dependent on *dharma*, for the souls to be embodied in. With determination strong and unerring, of good vows, truth speaking, and meritorious, (those) men of olden times were creatures like Brahmā (himself), O joy of the Kurus. They all met in heaven with the gods at their own choosing; and then they all went back again, moving about at will. And those men died at their own choosing, and lived at their own choosing - little afflicted, free from anxiety, successful, unassailed by mischances. They saw before their eyes the multitudes of the gods, the great-souled seers, and all the virtues; they were without envy and with passions subdued. They existed for thousands of years, and had thousands of sons; ...¹

But this paradisaical state was not to last, for the passing of Time brought with it the degeneration of beings, and this brought upon man the retributive aspects of the law of karma.

Then, in another interval of time, men walked on the surface of the earth. Overcome by desire and anger, maintaining themselves by trickery and deceit, and overpowered by greed and folly, thereupon men were abandoned by the gods. These evil ones, because of their evil karma, they went to hell or to animal form, and were cooked again and again in diverse transmigrations. Their wishes were vain, their resolve was vain, their knowledge was vain; and, also, from being confounded they were afraid of everything - their share of suffering rose. They were marked for the most part by their disagreeable actions. Of low-extraction, full of sickness, evil-natured, dull, these evil-ones became short-lived, gathering the fruit of their terrible deeds. Begging for all desires, these unbelievers broke the bounds. O son of Kuntī, the path of a dead man is (governed) by his own deeds (done) here.²

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- 1) Nirmalāni çarīrāṇi viçuddhāni çarīriṇām/
 Sasarja dharmatantrāṇi pūrvotpannaḥ prajāpatiḥ//
 Amoghabalasaṃkalpāḥ suvratāḥ satyavādināḥ/
 Brahmabhūtā narāḥ puṇyāḥ purāṇāḥ kurunandana//
 Sarve devaiḥ samāyānti svacchandena nabhastalam/
 Tataçca punarāyānti sarve svacchandacāriṇāḥ//
 Svacchandamaraṇāçcāsannarāḥ svacchandañivinaḥ/
 Alpabādhā nirātāṅkā siddhārthā nirupadravāḥ//
 Draçṭāro devasaṃghānāmṛṣiṇām ca mahātmanām/
 Pratyakṣāḥ sarvadharmāṇām dāntā vigatamatsarāḥ/
 Āsanvarṣasahasrāṇi tathā putrasahasriṇāḥ/ ibid., 181.11-16.
- 2) Tataḥ kālāntare anyasminprthivītalacāriṇāḥ//
 Kāmakrodhābhībhūtāste māyāvyājopajīvināḥ/
 Lobhamohābhībhūtāçca tyaktā devaistato narāḥ//
 Açubhaiḥ karmabhiḥ pāpāstiryāñnarakagāmināḥ/
 Saṃsāreṣu vicitreṣu pacyamānāḥ punaḥ punaḥ//
 Mogheṣṭā moghasaṃkalpā moghaññā vicetasāḥ/
 Sarvāṭiçāṅkīnaçcaiva saṃvṛtīḥ kleçabhāgināḥ/
 Açubhaiḥ karmabhiçcāpi prāyaçaḥ paricihnitāḥ//
 Dauṣkulyā vyādhībahulā durātmāno apratāpināḥ/

After establishing the fact of karma and outlining its 'history', Mārkaṇḍeya turns to Yudhiṣṭhira's query on how the individual is pursued through time by his good and bad deeds.

This man, with his original God-created body, makes a great accumulation of good and evil (deeds). Having abandoned, at the end of his life, this mostly exhausted body, he is born instantly in a (new) womb - there is no existence inbetween. There the deeds he has done, always follow him like a shadow. (These deeds) now ripen (and) he is born, deserving happiness or suffering.¹

However, adds Mārkaṇḍeya, even some who have 'the eye of knowledge' (*jñānadṛṣṭibhiḥ*) believe that at death there is only death and no consequences from good and bad deeds. But Mārkaṇḍeya contrasts these deniers of karma and transmigration who follow the way of the foolish (*abuddhīnām gatir*), with the learned (*jñānavatām*) who follow the highest way (*gatimuttamām*). Practising austerities (*tapas*), devoted to learning, of steadfast vows, obedient to their *guru*, patient and dignified, with passions subdued, they are born to pure wombs (*śubhayonyantaragatāḥ*) and generally attain auspicious markings (*prāyaśaḥ śubhalakṣaṇāḥ*). They are, as the law of karma would require, in control of their own destiny, and attain the due reward:

From subjection of their senses, they are self-controlled; from being pure, they are indifferent to disease; from having little fear of affliction, they are free from danger. Being in the womb, being born or moving about, in every case, those with the eye of knowledge know their own soul and also the Universal Soul. Having attained this earth through karma, they again go to heaven.²

However, having considered at length how man, and not god, is responsible for the deeds he performs, and how each man reaps himself what he himself sows, and

Bhavantyalpāyusaḥ pāpā raudrakarmaphalodayāḥ/
Nāthantaḥ sarvakāmānām nāstikā bhinnasetavaḥ//
Jantoḥ pretasya kaunteya gatiḥ svairiha karmabhiḥ/ *ibid.*, 181.16-21.

- 1) Ayamādiḥcarireṇa devasṛṣṭena mānavaḥ/
Śubhānāmaśubhānām ca kurute saṃcayam mahat//
Āyuso ante prahāyedaṃ kṣīnaprāyaṃ kalevaram/
Sambhavatyeva yugapadyonau nāstyantarābhavaḥ//
Tatrāsyā svakṛtaṃ karma chāyevānugataṃ sadā/
Phalatyatha sukhārho vā duḥkhārho vāpi jāyate// *ibid.*, 181.23-25.
- 2) Jitendriyatvādvaḥṇaḥ śuklatvānmandaroginaḥ/
Alpabādhaparitrāsādbhavanti nirupadravāḥ//
Cyavantaṃ jāyamānaṃ ca garbhasthaṃ caiva sarvaśaḥ/
Svamātmānaṃ paraṃ caiva budhyante jñānacakṣuṣaḥ/
Karmabhūmimimāṃ prāpya punaryānti surālayam// *ibid.*, 181.30-31.

thus establishing the very basis of the law of karma, Mārkaṇḍeya revealingly demolishes it all by allowing that there are forces outside the agency of the individual and outside the control of the individual. To Yudhiṣṭhira, he explains: 'O king, (what) men acquire, some is from fate, some through chance, and some by their own acts.' If this is the case, man is in no sense the arbiter of his own destiny alone.

Finally, Mārkaṇḍeya considers Yudhiṣṭhira's concluding doubt: do the consequences of one's acts come to fruition in this world or the next? Now, the obvious and logical answer - given the law of karma - would be both. But instead Mārkaṇḍeya considers not acts individually, but the relative balance or quality of all the acts of a particular being and where the primary reward for such a balance would come to fruition. According to Mārkaṇḍeya, given the relative degree of self-restraint or self-indulgence for a particular individual's lifetime, there are four possibilities as to where there 'greatest good' will come to fruition:

O Yudhiṣṭhira, I think (that) what is the greatest good in this world of men, for one (man) it will be here and not there; for another it will be there and not here, for another here and there; and for another, not there and not here. Those who have abundant wealth, with their bodies well-adorned, they always enjoy themselves. Most excellent slayer of enemies, of these delighters in the happiness of the body, this is (their) world, (but) never that (world beyond). Those who are yoked to yoga, devoted to austerities, habituated to the study of the *Veda*, who wear out their bodies, conquer their senses, and who are intent upon the welfare of creatures, their world is that (other one, and) not this (one), O enemy slayer. Those who practise *dharma* alone as the first of all, who in time obtain their wealth by means of *dharma*, who acquire a wife, and worship with sacrifices, this is their world, and also the other. Those foolish ones who do not devote themselves to knowledge, austerity, gift-giving, and to procreation, these unhappy ones do not achieve happiness. This (world) is not theirs, and nor is the other (world).²

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- 1) Kiṃciddaivāddhaṭhātkiṃcitkiṃcideva svakarmabhiḥ/
Prāpnuvanti narā rājan ... ibid., 181.32.
- 2) Maṇuṣyaloke yacchreyaḥ paraṃ manye yudhiṣṭhira//
Iha vaikasya nāmutra amutraikasya no iha/
Iha cāmutra caikasya nāmutraikasya no iha//
Dhanāni yeṣāṃ vipulāni santi
nityaṃ ramante suvibhūṣitāṅgāḥ/
Teṣāmayam ṣatruvaraghna loka
nāsau sadā dehasukhe ratānām//
Ye yogayuktāstapasi prasaktāḥ
svādhyāyaçilā jarayanti dehān/
Jitendriyā bhūtahite nivīṣṭā-

The differences between Mārkaṇḍeya's teachings on karma and those of Yayāti are obviously considerable. But principally they come back to style, feel and purpose. In the *Uttarayāyāta*, the law of karma is presented in the form of a personal revelation of a doctrine that is rather mysterious and largely unknown and unaccepted. As is to be expected, the speaker is at much greater pains to explain how this not exactly obvious theory functions. Mārkaṇḍeya's discourse, though, is presented as a teaching from a *guru* to a pupil. And by the time of Mārkaṇḍeya we may presume that the idea had much wider currency and acceptance. To the extent that these doctrines are elaborated, they are presented at a fairly abstract level. Gone, or 'purified out', are all the naturalistic and folkloristic elements of the *Uttarayāyāta*. But more significant is the fact that the detailed workings of these doctrines are hardly elaborated at all. For the principal purpose of Mārkaṇḍeya's discourse does not seem to be to explain karma and *samsāra*, but to establish to Yudhiṣṭhira's satisfaction (and the satisfaction of listeners generally) that acts and events do not occur at mere random and devoid of all meaning, but according to the universal order of karma. If it was accepted that human actions are meaningful, and that - whatever current misfortunes and reverses - 'good' acts do receive their due fruition in this or future lives, then a firm foundation would be established for the importance of following a life of action (*karmayoga*), in accordance with the orthodox brāhmaṇic view of *dharma*. In fact, once the doctrines of karma and transmigration had been accepted, it was particularly important for the orthodox tradition to be able to account for the Pāṇḍavas' reversal of fortunes - which was by any measure severe - in terms of karma lest the very foundations for abiding by

steṣāmasau nāyamarighna lokah//
 Ye dharmameva prathamam caranti
 dharmena labdhvā ca dhanāni kālē/
 Dārānavāpya kratubhīryajante
 teṣāmayam caiva paraṇca lokah//
 Ye naiva vidyām na tapo na dānam
 na cāpi mūḍhāḥ prajane yatante/
 Na cādhigacchanti sukhānyabhāgyā-
 steṣāmayam caiva paraṇca nāsti// *ibid.*, 181.33-38.

dharma were threatened.¹ The comments of Kṛṣṇa's elder brother Balarāma delineate the problem. Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa were prompted to visit the Pāṇḍavas in their forest exile after receiving news that Yudhiṣṭhira was practising awesome austerities. On seeing the emaciated Yudhiṣṭhira, Balarāma comments:

O Kṛṣṇa, dharmic conduct leads not to well-being, and the adharmic (conduct) of men leads (not) to defeat if our great-souled, hair-braided, forest-dwelling, bark-wearing Yudhiṣṭhira is distressed. Duryodhana rules the earth and yet the earth does not swallow him up; a man of small intellect might indeed think adharmic conduct is better than *dharma*.²

In the Mahābhārata, then, the concern of Mārkaṇḍeya, and the orthodox brāhmaṇic tradition he speaks for, does not seem to be with karma and *samsāra* as such, but with *dharma*. Karma and *samsāra* merely provide a sort of springboard to justify the importance and pursuit of orthodox notions of *dharma*, at a time when many in society were considering other possibilities. It is obviously significant that in Mārkaṇḍeya's fourfold calculation of the 'greatest good' (*śreyas param*) those who follow *mokṣa* or the fourth end of the *caturvarga* attain the other world only. But those who follow *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma*, the first three ends, attain this world and the next. In other words, those who live life in this world and abide by the concerns of orthodox brāhmaṇic society are pre-eminent. However, it is noteworthy that in this teaching, which is designed for a more popular audience, the law of karma is not presented as an iron law. Mārkaṇḍeya admits a place for the play of chance and fate. It might be suggested that for the intended audience, the

1) These considerations can be seen in Mārkaṇḍeya's final assurance to the grieving Yudhiṣṭhira: 'In due course, you will attain by your own acts the highest heaven, the abode of the virtuous. O Indra of the Kurus, deserver of happiness, beholding (even) your distress, (still) you must have no doubt.'

Svargaṃ param puṇyakṛtām nivāsaṃ

krameṇa samprāpsyatha karmabhiḥ svaiḥ/

Mā bhūdvīṇkā tava kauravendra

dr̥ṣṭvātmanaḥ kleṣamīmaṃ sukhārha// *ibid.*, 181.41.

2) Na kṛṣṇa dharmācārīto bhavāya

jantoradharmācca parābhavāya/

Yudhiṣṭhīro yatra jaṭi mahātmā

vanāṣṭrayaḥ kliṣyati cīravāsāḥ//

Duryodhanaṁcāpi mahīm praṣṭi

na cāsyā bhūmirvivaraṃ dadāti/

Dharmādharmācārīto garīyā-

nitīva manyeta naro alpabuddhiḥ// *ibid.*, 119.5-6.

unpredictability of human existence was such an oppressively obvious fact that an unbending law of karma would be too much to believe. Whatsoever, it may well have been too much for the brahmin authors of the didactic sections on karma. So, by reasserting the primacy of karma their purpose was substantially achieved; and by conceding a place for fate, chance and time' the teaching is made more palatable, and an ever-useful escape clause is provided for when the misfortune or suffering is too monstrous.

If anything, these brahmin concerns with the law of karma can be seen even more clearly in a story that Mārkaṇḍeya relates to Yudhiṣṭhira a little further on. The setting of the story is itself significant. The story begins with a brahmin called Kauṣika destroying a heron with a mere glance and an angry thought, for the poor bird had dropped dung on his head as he stood under the tree reciting the *Vedas*. When the brahmin saw the bird dead he became sorrowful and admitted that passion and hatred had possessed him. The brahmin then proceeded to a household to beg food, but was made to wait while the mistress of the house first fed her hungry husband. The brahmin was angered at this. But, because of her devotion to *dharma*, she was aware of the brahmin's destruction of the bird; and she delivers a long discourse on the qualities of brahminhood, and as anger and delusion (*krodhamohau*) were not the marks of a brahmin, she concluded that this brahmin did not really know the *dharma*. She added that a hunter (*vyādhah*) - of all people - who dwelt at Mithilā would explain *dharma* to him.²

Arriving at Mithilā, Kauṣika found this hunter in the middle of a slaughterhouse where he sold the meat of buffalo and deer. The hunter greeted him properly, and indicating that the slaughterhouse was not a proper place for a brahmin, took him home. There the brahmin commiserated with the hunter that his occupation, which required him to do such terrible deeds, did not seem appropriate for him.³ But the

1) In Mārkaṇḍeya's 'history' Time seems to be the cause of man's initial fall.

2) *Ibid.*, 197.1-44.

3) *Ibid.*, 198.10-18.

hunter did not desire sympathy, or feel that it was even necessary; and nor did he even feel that his work was wicked. Here was no ordinary hunter.

The hunter soon explained that in his previous body he had been a brahmin who had studied the *Vedas* and its branches, and had fallen to his present condition through his own fault (*ātmadoṣakṛtair*).¹ One day the brahmin had been out hunting close to an *āśrama* with his friend the king. The brahmin, though, had mistaken a deer-skin clad hermit for the real thing and wounded him with an arrow. That hermit, who possessed terrible *tapas* (*ugratapasam*), angrily cursed him to be a hunter, born from the womb of a *çūdra*. The brahmin sought forgiveness, and though the hermit reiterated his curse, he also showed his grace (*prasādaḥ* *kr̥tas*) by modifying it. Thus, though the brahmin would be born a hunter from the womb of a *çūdra*, he would be a knower of *dharma* (*dharmañño*), be obedient to his parents, remember his former birth, go to heaven, and he would again be a brahmin at the termination of the curse.²

This very unconventional hunter then discoursed on a wide variety of topics to do with *dharma* and the behaviour of the strict; but the underlying burden of his teaching is that individuals must fulfill their current lot, no matter what, in accordance with the orthodox brāhmanic dictates of *dharma*. The explanation and justification for this is the law of karma. Though God or the Placer might ordain the individual's current place in the world, He does this on the basis of that person's past deeds. It is the individual alone who determines, and thus deserves, his current lot through his own past deeds.

The hunter, in fact, is his own best example. To the brahmin he explains:

The work I perform, this is terrible, undoubtedly. But, O brahmin, ordinance is powerful, for our former deeds are hard to overcome. This sinful work is due to evil formerly done. Brahmin, I exert myself to destroy this sin. When it is determined before by ordinance, the slayer is but the instrument, (and) verily we become the instrument of this (former) *karman*, O highest of the twice-born. ... What I do is my *dharma* (and) I will not abandon it. I know it is due to my former deeds, (so) by this work I live. O brahmin, abandoning one's own work is here looked upon as against *dharma*. But he who is devoted to his own

1) *Ibid.*, 198.22.

2) *Ibid.*, 205.21-29, 206.1-6

work, it is deemed to be *dharma*. For acts performed previously, do not abandon the embodied one; the Placer considers this ordinance in many ways in his determination of one's work.¹

Therefore, concluded the hunter, 'A sensible man who lives by a cruel occupation should consider how his occupation can be made virtuous (and) how to be delivered from being defeated (by it).'² Again the hunter was his own best example. Thus this hunter did not slay animals himself but merely sold the meat of animals slain by others,³ and did not himself eat meat. Moreover, he abided by the various orthodox *grhastha* virtues. He only lay with his wife at her fertile season; he only ate at night, and fasted by the day; he was truth-speaking always; gave as much as he was able; lived only on the leavings (*avaṣiṣṭena*) left by gods, guests and dependents; despised nothing; reproved no one more powerful than himself; was obedient to his parents and betters; honoured the brahmins; and observed the *dharma*.⁴

The ups and downs of life, the hunter sternly emphasised, were due to karma and were the responsibility of the doer alone. They were not due to the various external 'forces' that man more normally preferred to blame.

Whether one does good deeds or bad deeds, O best of the twice born, this man necessarily incurs (the result); there is no doubt here. And having incurred a bad lot, blames the gods severely. The unlearned (person) does not recognise his (own) sinful acts.⁵

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- 1) Yadahaṃ hyācare karma ghorametadasaṃcayam// (1)
Vidhistu balavānbrahmandustaraṃ hi purākṛtam/
Purākṛtasya pāpasya karmadoṣo bhavatyayam/
Doṣasyaitasya vai brahmanvighāte yatnavānahanam// (2)
Vidhinā vihite pūrvam nimittam ghātako bhavet/
Nimittabhūtā hi vayam karmaṇo aśya dvijottama// (3)
Svadharmā itī kṛtvā tu na tyajāmi dvijottama/
Purākṛtamiti jñātvā jīvāmyetena karmaṇā// (14)
Svakarma tyajato brahmannadharma iha dr̥ṣyate/
Svakarmanirato yastu sa dharma itī niṣcayaḥ// (15)
Pūrvam hi vihitaṃ karma dehinaṃ na vimuñcati/
Dhātṛā vidhirayaṃ dr̥ṣṭo bahudhā karmanirṇaye// (16) *ibid.*, 199.1-3 & 14-16.
 - 2) Draṣṭavyam tu bhavetprājña krūre karmaṇi vartatā/
Katham karma ṣubham kuryām katham mucye parābhavāt/*ibid.*, 199.17//
 - 3) Though in a long justification of his own occupation, he justifies - under proper circumstances - the hunting and eating of meat. *Ibid.*, 199.4-13.
 - 4) *Ibid.*, 198.20-22, 198.31-32, 199.18.
 - 5) Yatkarotyāṣubham karma ṣubham vā dvijasattama/
Avaṣyam tatsamāpnoti puruṣo nātra saṃcayaḥ//
Viśamāṃ ca daṣāṃ prāpya devāṅgarhati vai bhr̥ṣam/
Ātmanaḥ karmadoṣāṇi na vijānātyapaṇḍitaḥ// *ibid.*, 200.5-6.

And because the unlearned fail to recognise the importance of their own acts, they fail to realise that they alone are capable of being their own salvation. It is their own actions they should rely on. Man alone is the cause of his own fall and the means of his own salvation.

The fool, the dishonest (person), and also the fickle, O best of the twice-born, they have not the understanding, wise conduct or manly courage to save themselves when a reversal of pleasure and pain is experienced. Whatever desired object he should seek, that desired object he will attain, if the fruit of (this) man's action should not be dependent on another.¹

Nevertheless, while relying on his own understanding, conduct and manly effort, a man still cannot protect himself from life's many reverses - reverses which are the fruit of one's own past deeds. Man is a prisoner not of fate or of the gods but of his own past deeds which carry over from one life to another, and the fruit of which he alone will inexorably experience.

But virtuous men who are restrained, able and wise, are seen to be unsuccessful and failing in all their actions. (While) some other (person) is forever ready to injure creatures and to cheat mankind, (yet) here he lives happily. Prosperity can attend someone who sits without exerting himself, (while) someone doing deeds does not obtain what should be obtained. ... (Under) the same auspicious stars, many (people) do appear. (Yet) great is the diverseness of fruit (that) is observed in the juncture of their previous deeds. No one, O best of brahmins, is master of his own lot; (what) appears here is the maturing of one's own original deeds. Brahmin, this is according to sacred knowledge: the soul is indeed eternal, (and) the body of all living creatures in this world is transient. When the person is struck down, the body, too, is destroyed, (and) the soul wanders to another (body) bound by the bonds of (previous) deeds. ... For no one else enjoys the deeds that one has done; the doer alone partakes of the happiness and suffering. Whatever deed he has done, that he attains; there is no destruction of what is done. Those of impure character become pure; the best of men become doers of evil. In this world a man is followed by his own deeds. By these he is determined, then he is born.²

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- 1) Mūḍho naikṛtikaṣcāpi capalaṣca dvijottama/
Sukhaduḥkhaviparyāso yadā samupapadyate/
Nainaṃ prajñā sunītaṃ vā trāyate naiva pauraṣam//
Yo yamicchedyathā kāmaṃ taṃ taṃ kāmaṃ samaṇuyāt/
Yadi syādaparādhīnaṃ puruṣasya kriyāphalam// *ibid.* 200.7-8.
- 2) Saṃyatāṣcāpi dakṣaṣca matimantaṣca mānavāḥ/
Dr̥ṣyante niṣphalāḥ santaḥ prahīṇāḥ sarvakarmabhiḥ// (9)
Bhūtānāmaparaḥ kaṣciddhiṃsāyāṃ satatottthitaḥ/
Vañcanāyāṃ ca lokasya sa sukheneha jīvaṭi// (10)
Aceṣṭamānamāśīnaṃ cṛiḥ kaṃcidupatiṣṭhati/
Kaṣcitkarmāṇi kurvanhi na prāpyamadhigacchati// (11)
Bahavaḥ saṃpradr̥ṣyante tulyanakṣatramaṇḡgalāḥ/
Mahacca phalavaīṣaṃyaṃ dr̥ṣyate karmasaṃdhiṣu// (21)

For the hunter it is an undeniable fact or observation that man is not in full control of his own destiny, for if he was 'No one would die, no one would age, all would have every desire, and none would experience the disagreeable, if they had control of themselves.'¹

At this, the brahmin asks some crucial questions concerning the actual workings of karma and transmigration: 'How does he arise in the womb; (and) how is the birth favourable of the virtuous and unfavourable of the evil; how goes it, best of men?'² The hunter agrees to explain all this succinctly and quickly (*samāsena tu te kṣīpam*), and this he does, for his explanation amounts to no more than 'This karma, it appears, is connected with impregnation.'³ Instead he discourses anew on the miseries of the bonded, transmigrating soul. This is pictured as a state of constant suffering. Any apparent happiness is merely another form of suffering.

By means of virtuous (deeds) one will become divine; through mixed (deeds) one will become a man; through deluded (deeds) one (is born) in animal wombs; and through sinful deeds, one goes to hell. A man, because of the evils done by himself, is cooked in transmigration, and constantly assailed by the sufferings of birth, death and old age. Bound by the bonds of their previous deeds, the souls roll round, going to thousands of animal wombs and to hell. Having died, a creature suffers because of whatever deed he has done himself. He attains an impure womb, for the sake of resisting that suffering. Thereupon, he again takes up numerous other new deeds; but, because of these (new deeds), he is cooked again, like a sick man who has eaten what is unsuitable. Ever afflicted with suffering, (though) called happy and not

Na kaṇḍīḍate brahmanṣvayaṃgrāhasya sattama/
Karmaṇām prākṛtānām vai iha siddhiḥ pradr̥ṣyate// (22)
Yathā ṣrutiriyam brahmañjīvaḥ kila sanātanaḥ/
Ṣarīramadhruvaṃ loke sarveṣāṃ prāṇināmiha// (23)
Vadhyamāne ṣarīre tu dehanāco bhavatyuta/
Jīvaḥ saṃkramate anyatra karmabandhanibandhanaḥ// (24)
Anyo hi nācṇāti kṛtaṃ hi karma
sa eva kartā sukhaduḥkhabhāgī/
Yattena kiṃciddhi kṛtaṃ hi karma
tadaṣnute nāsti kṛtasya nāṣaḥ// (27)
Apunyaṣṭilāṣa bhavanti punyā
narottamāḥ pāpakṛto bhavanti/
Naro anuyātaṣṭviha karmabhīḥ svai-
stataḥ samutpadyati bhāvitastaiḥ// (28) *ibid.*, 200.9-11 & 21-24 & 27-28.

- 1) Na mriyeyurna jīryeyuḥ sarve syuḥ sārvaḥkāmikāḥ/
Nāpriyaṃ pratipaṣyeyurvaṣṭitvaṃ yadi vai bhavet// *ibid.*, 200.19.
- 2) Kathaṃ saṃbhavate yonau kathaṃ vā punyapāpayoḥ/
Jātīḥ punyā hyapunyaṣṭaḥ kathaṃ gaṣṭhati sattama// *ibid.*, 200.29.
- 3) Garbhādhānaṣamāyuktaṃ karmedaṃ saṃpradr̥ṣyate/ *ibid.*, 200.30.

suffering, he wanders about in transmigration, finding its many wheels, because his bondage has not ceased and because his (former) deeds rise up.¹

Though the individual is thus a prisoner of his own past and suffers accordingly, this does not mean that he is completely determined and powerless with respect to the future. Proper conduct does matter, and proper conduct is conduct in accordance with *dharma*. In the first instance, it can lead to a sojourn in heaven with its consequent respite from suffering.

But if his fetters cease and he is purified by his previous acts, he attains to the worlds of virtue, (and) having gone there he suffers no pain. Doing evil, the one of evil conduct attains an evil end. Therefore, one should strive to do virtue and shun what causes one to fall. If uncomplaining and grateful, a man devotes himself only to the auspicious, he attains to happiness, *dharma*, profit and heaven. A perfected, subdued, restrained, self-controlled and wise man has an existence (which is) boundless here in this world and in the other world. ... The wise man rejoices in *dharma*, he lives on *dharma*, and when he has gained possessions through *dharma*, good brahmin, he waters the root of *dharma*, wherever he sees virtues.²

However, though this virtuous one may gain heaven and the appropriate rewards of his virtue (i.e. the fruit of *dharma*), nevertheless he remains within the cycle of

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- 1) Çubhaiḥ prayogairdevatvaṃ vyāmiçrairmānuṣo bhavet/
 Mohanīyairvīyonīṣu tvadhogāmī ca kilbiṣaiḥ//
 Jātimṛtyujarāduḥkhaiḥ satataṃ samabhidrutaiḥ/
 Saṃsāre pacyamānaṣca doṣairātmakṛtairnaraḥ//
 Tiryagyonisahasrāṇi gatvā narakameva ca/
 Jīvāḥ saṃparivartante karmabandhanibandhanāḥ//
 Jantustu karmabhīṣṭaiḥ svakṛtāḥ pretya duḥkhitaiḥ/
 Tadduḥkhaḥpratiḥātārthamapūṇyāṃ yonimaçnute//
 Tataḥ karma samādatte punaranyannavaṃ bahu/
 Pacyate to punastena bhuktvā pathyamivāturaḥ//
 Ajasrameva duḥkhārto aduḥkhitaiḥ sukhasaṃjñitaiḥ/
 Tato anivṛttabandhatvātkarmaṇāmudayādapi/
 Parikrāmatī saṃsāre cakravadbahuvedanaḥ// *ibid.*, 200.32-37.
- 2) Sa cennivṛttabandhastu viçuddhaçcāpi karmabhiḥ/
 Prāpnoti sukrātāṇīlokānyatra gatvā na çocati// (38)
 Pāpaṃ kurvanpāpavṛttaiḥ pāpasyāntaṃ niyacchati/
 Tasmātpūṇyaṃ yatetkartuṃ varjayeta ca pātakaṃ// (39)
 Anasūyuh kṛtājñāṣca kalyāṇānyeva sevate/
 Sukhāṇi dharmamārthaṃ ca svargaṃ ca labhate naraḥ// (40)
 Saṃskṛtasya hi dāntasya niyatasya yatātmanaḥ/
 Prāññasyānantarā vṛttirīha loke paratra ca// (41)
 Prāñño dharmena ramate dharmāṃ caivopajīvati/
 Tasya dharmādevāpteṣu dhaneṣu dvijasattama/
 Tasyaiva siñcate mūlaṃ guṇānpaçyati yatra vai// (44) *ibid.*, 200.38-41 & 44.
 Amending Critical Edition 'na gacchati' in 200.39 to 'niyacchati' for which there is sound textual support. The Critical Edition would read 'Doing evil, the one of evil conduct goes not to an evil end' - which hardly makes sense.

samsāra and a sojourn in heaven is merely followed by a new birth. Therefore, ultimately the virtuous and wise will go beyond the pursuit of heaven and seek final release from the cycle of rebirth. This, though, can only be achieved by the right means, but little more is said of these means than the adoption of renunciation, indifference, austerity and self-control. But what the hunter does emphasise is that even this final pursuit does not mean the abandonment of *dharma*.

Having obtained the fruit of *dharma*, a (man) may not be satisfied, O greatest of the twice-born. And not being satisfied, he accepts his disgust with the eye of knowledge. A man, in this world, with the eye of insight, does not attach (himself) to (what is) defective; if he chooses, he grows indifferent (but) he does not give up *dharma*. Observing that the nature of the world is decay, he devotes himself to abandoning everything; thereupon he strives for 'liberation', (but) by the right means, not the wrong. Thus he accepts the disgust, abandons evil deeds, becomes set on *dharma*, and attains to final release. For a creature, austerity is best of all, (and) equanimity and self-control are its root; by it, he obtains all the desires which he desires in his mind. Through the repression of the senses, through truth and self-control, he attains to the place of *brahman*, which is the universal soul, O best of the twice-born.¹

The hunter (unlike Mārkaṇḍeya) has introduced a new and important consideration: final escape from karma can only be achieved by removing oneself altogether from the cycle of transmigration. However, little attention is paid to this point, just as little close consideration is given to the workings of karma and transmigration. Like Mārkaṇḍeya, the hunter's principal concern is to use karma and *samsāra* to justify why the individual must continue to perform the duties or *dharma* that pertain to his station in life - however undesirable. The same concern lies behind the fourth¹ of the *Mahābhārata*'s detailed discussions of these doctrines.

1) Dharmasya ca phalaṃ labdhvā na trpyati mahādvija/
 Atrpyamāṇo nirvedamādatte jñānacakṣuṣā//
 Prajñācakṣurnara iha doṣaṃ naivānurudhyate/
 Virajyati yathākāmaṃ na ca dharmam vimuñcati//
 Sarvatyāge ca yatate dṛṣṭvā lokaṃ kṣayātmakam/
 Tato mokṣe prayatate nānupāyādupāyataḥ//
 Evaṃ nirvedamādatte pāpaṃ karma jahāti ca/
 Dhārmikaṣṇāpi bhavati mokṣaṃ ca labhate param//
 Tapo niḥcreyasaṃ jantostasya mūlaṃ ṣaṃ damah/
 Tena sarvānavāpnoti kāmānyānmanasecchati//
 Indriyāṇāṃ nirodhena satyena ca damena ca/
 Brahmaṇaḥ padamāpnoti yatparaṃ divijasattama// *ibid.*, 200.47-52.

In the midst of Bhīṣma's interminable teachings in the *Çāntiparvan* and *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira asks to hear about the highest ordinances of the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra* *vidhimuttamam*). At this timely moment the great ṛṣi Brhaspati, who is also priest to the gods, shows up. Bhīṣma takes a break and suggests Yudhiṣṭhira ask Brhaspati, adding that 'this (subject) is an eternal mystery' (*etadguhyam sanātanam*).¹

Yudhiṣṭhira first asks Brhaspati two questions: who was the friend of mortal creatures (*martyasya kaḥ sahāyo*), the father, mother, son or teacher; and who follows the departed to the next world?² Brhaspati answers that at death one has no mortal friend. The kith and kin of the departed mourn briefly over the dead body and then go their own way. In the final analysis, explains Brhaspati: 'A being is born alone, O king, (and) dies alone; (and) traverses (his) difficulties alone, and undergoes misfortune alone.'³

Only one thing accompanies the dead as a friend, and that is that individual's accumulated *dharma*, or virtue or righteousness.

Therefore men should always devote themselves to virtue for a friend. A living creature endowed with virtue goes to the highest Heaven. Similarly, (a man) endowed with non-virtue enters hell. Therefore a wise man should devote himself to virtue through which wealth rightly come by. Virtue is the only friend of men in the next world. ... Virtue, wealth and pleasure - these three form the fruit of life. (One should) attain these three by shunning non-virtue.⁴

While virtuous or dharmic behaviour alone can be considered as a friend, the idea expressed by Brhaspati is that one's acts, good and bad, alone accompany one in the hereafter. It must also be noted that Brhaspati emphasises virtuous behaviour in the pursuit of the three ends of man, which were of such cardinal importance to the

1) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 112.1-4.

2) *Ibid.*, 112.9-10.

3) Ekaḥ prasūto rājendra jantureko vinaṣyati/

Ekastarati durgāṇi gacchatyekaṣṭha durgatim// *ibid.*, 112.11; and 112.12-13.

4) Tasmāddharmāḥ sahāyārthe sevitavyāḥ sadā nṛbhiḥ/

Prāṇī dharmasamāyukto gacchate svargatim parām/

Tathāivādharmasamāyukto narakāyopapadyate// (14)

Tasmānnyāyāgatairarthairdharmāḥ seveta paṇḍitāḥ/

Dharma eko manuṣyāṇāṃ sahāyāḥ pāralaukikāḥ// (15)

Dharmaḥcārthaḥcā kāmāḥcā tritayam jīvite phalam/

Etattrayamavāptavyamadharmaparivarjitam// (17) *ibid.*, 112.14-15 & 17.

orthodox tradition - *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. However, as good acts also have karmic consequences, it may be presumed that for Brhaspati the goal is a better hereafter and higher rebirth rather than release from the cycle of existence. Brhaspati's concern is the concern of the orthodox tradition - people should at all costs fulfill their social obligations.

Yudhiṣṭhira then asks about the state or arrangement of the body (*ṣarīra-vicayam*) after death; how does virtue follow the departed? Brhaspati's answer is not entirely clear but does seem to assume that something like a subtle body accompanies the soul on the death of the physical body, and carries with it the acts which the five elements of the body bear witness to during the lifetime of the creature.

Earth, wind, ether, water and light as the fifth, along with the intellect and the soul, they perpetually see virtue and continually bear witness here to all living creatures. With these, virtue follows the *jīva* (after death). Skin, bones, flesh, vital seed and blood, O great-minded one, these abandon the body that has been left by the *jīva*. Then (if) endowed with virtue that *jīva* flourishes in happiness.¹

But how precisely an intangible quantity like the effects of good and bad deeds can become attached to a material quantity like the body's elements is not made clear.

Yudhiṣṭhira then asks about the origins of the vital seed (*katham retah pravartate*). Brhaspati explains that when the elements of the body - earth, wind, ether, water, light and mind - are satisfied (*trpteṣu*) through the eating of food, then the vital seed is produced (*retah sampadyate*); and when intercourse takes place between a man and a woman, the foetus is produced (*tato garbhaḥ sambhavati*). With conception explained, Yudhiṣṭhira asks how the soul that is begotten assumes a body (*jātaṣtu puruṣaḥ prapadyati*). Brhaspati explains that the soul, though not subject to

1) Pṛthivī vāyurākāṣamāpo jyotiṣca pañcamam/
 Buddhirātmā ca sahitā dharmam paṇyanti nityadā//
 Prāṇināmiha sarveṣāṃ sākṣibhūtāni cāṇiṣam/
 Etaṁ sa ha dharmo api taṁ jīvamanugacchati//
 Tvagasthimāṇsaṁ ṣukraṁ ca ṣṇitaṁ ca mahāmate/
 Ṣarīraṁ varjayantyete jīvitena vivarjitaṁ//
 Tato dharmasamāyuktaḥ sa jīvaḥ sukhamedhate/ibid., 112.20-23.

space or time, is nevertheless bonded to a material body: '(Though) being boundless and perpetual, (the soul) is overwhelmed by these (material) elements. And (when) freed from these elements, it again goes the other way (i.e. through death). But the *jīva*, joined to these elements, attains (a body). Then (these elements) witness his acts, whether good or bad.'

Next, Yudhiṣṭhira asks where the *jīva* resides to attain happiness and suffering (*jīvaḥ ... kvasthaḥ sukhaduḥkhe samaṇute*) once it has abandoned the material elements of the body. Brhaspati indicates the *jīva* is quickly reborn in a new body, and there enjoys or suffers according to the acts it has accumulated.

The *jīva*, joined to its virtue, quickly enters the seed, and mixed with the menses of women, is born in time, O Bhārata. (After birth) the man obtains misery, and the painful cycle of rebirth - death and torment through Yama's attendants. Here in this world, from birth onwards, a being, O Pārthiva, experiences the acts he has done, based on the fruit of his virtue.²

Given the fruit of the individual's acts, there are, according to Brhaspati, two possibilities. If, according to the best of his power the individual follows virtue from birth onwards, he enjoys perpetual happiness. If his acts are mixed, both virtuous and non-virtuous, the *jīva* first undergoes happiness and then suffering.

Thereafter, Brhaspati says nothing further about happiness, but outlines the nature and extent of this suffering in forbidding detail. An individual's lack of virtue, it would seem, is requited first by torment in hell, and then rebirth in various low and despised animal forms. Brhaspati explains:

(He who) is endowed with unrighteousness goes to the domain of Yama. Having met with great suffering (there), he is reborn in an animal womb. ... (If) a twice-born (person), having studied the four *Vedas*, is filled with folly, (and) thereupon accepts (something) from a fallen man, he is born in the womb of an ass. He lives as an ass for fifteen years, O Bhārata. (After he has) died as an ass he (then) has to live as a bull for seven years. And also, (after he

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- 1) Āsannamātraḥ satataṁ tairbhūtairabhibhūyate/
Vipramuktaṣca tairbhūtaḥ punaryātyaparāṁ gatim/
Sa tu bhūtasamāyuktaḥ prāpnute jīva eva ha//
Tato asya karma paçyanti çubhaṁ vā yadi vāçubham/ *ibid.*, 112.29-30.
 - 2) Jīvo dharmasamāyuktaḥ çighraṁ retastvamāgataḥ/
Strīṇāṁ puṣpaṁ samāsādyā sūte kālena bhārata//
Yamasya puruṣaḥ kleṣaṁ yamasya puruṣairvadham/
Duḥkhaṁ saṁsāracakraṁ ca naraḥ kleṣaṁ ca vindati//
Ihaloke ca sa prāṇī janmaprabhṛti pārthiva/
Svakṛtaṁ karma vai bhuṅkte dharmasya phalamāçritaḥ// *ibid.*, 112.32-34.

has) died as a bull, he (then) is born as a brahmin *rākṣasa*. (He lives) as a brahmin *rākṣasa* for three months; then he is born (again) as a brahmin.¹

And again:

O King, the ungrateful (man) at death goes to the domain of Yama. In the domain of Yama, he incurs terrible punishment through the enraged (servants of Yama). Sharp-edged spears, hammers, spikes, terrible heated jars, (heated) sand, and the thorns of the *çālmālī* (plant) (are used) in the terrible hell of *Asipattravana* ('forest of sword blades'). ... Having incurred there these dreadful torments, then he is slain, O Bhārata. (After) returning to the wheel of transmigration he is reborn in the womb of a worm. (There) he lives as a worm for fifteen years, O Bhārata. Then, having entered a womb, he indeed dies there prematurely. Then (this) creature is born through many hundreds of wombs. Having gone through many transmigrations, then he is reborn as an animal.²

He has, though, still a long way to go before regaining human form. If this is the lot of one who is merely guilty of the sin of ingratitude, the message is clear enough: given the doctrine of karma right behaviour is of the first importance. And right behaviour in this context means abiding by one's *varṇāçrama dharma*.³

The final detailed discussion of karma and *samsāra* in the *Mahābhārata* is to be found in the *Āçvamedhikaparvan*, where there occurs the philosophical text known as the *Anugītā*. After declining to repeat to the forgetful Arjuna the *Bhagavadgītā* - once was presumably enough even for God - Kṛṣṇa instead relates the ancient tradition (*itihāsa purāṭana*) of a long dialogue between an unnamed brahmin, and

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- 1) Adharmeṇa samāyukto yamasya viṣayaṃ gataḥ/
Mahadduḥkhaṃ samāsādyā tiryagyonau prajāyate// (37)
Adhītya caturo vedāndvijo mohasamanvitah/
Patitātpratigṛhyātha kharayonau prajāyate// (40)
Kharo jīvati varṣāṇi daça pañca ca bhārata/
Kharo mṛto balīrvadaḥ sapta varṣāṇi jīvati// (41)
Balīvardo mṛtaçcāpi jāyate brahmarākṣasaḥ/
Brahmarakṣastu trīnmāsāṇstato jāyati brāhmaṇaḥ// (42) *ibid.*, 112.37 & 40-42.
 - 2) Kṛtaghnastu mṛto rājanyamasya viṣayaṃ gataḥ/
Yamasya viṣaye kruddhairvadhaṃ prāpnoti dāruṇam//
Paṭṭisaṃ mudgaraṃ çūlamagnikumbhaṃ ca dāruṇam/
Asipatravanam ghoram vālukāṃ kūṭaçālmālīm//
Yātanāḥ prāpya tatrogrāstato vadhyati bhārata/
Samsārācakramāsādyā kṛmiyonau prajāyate//
Kṛmirbhavati varṣāṇi daça pañca ca bhārata/
Tato garbhaṃ samāsādyā tatraiva mriyate çicuḥ//
Tato garbhaçatairjanturbahubhiḥ samprajāyate/
Samsārāṇṇaça bahūngatvā tatastiryakprajāyate// *ibid.*, 112.80-84.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, 112.1-113.

another brahmin called Kaçyapa,¹ on the subject of *Brahman*; though a wide range of topics is in fact covered. One part of the teaching concerns the problem of the nature of human action within the context of karma and *samsāra*.

The brahmin begins the discourse with a brief autobiography of his own wanderings through the cycle of transmigration, and heaven and hell. However, though all this is related as direct experience, it is again lacking in the heady and dramatic quality of King Yayāti's account. The brahmin describes how, because of his various acts (*vividhaiḥ karmabhis*), he had repeatedly undergone death and birth; births which were characterised by diverse kinds of happiness and suffering (*sukhāni ca vicitrāṇi duḥkhāni*). But it is the weakness and ignorance of man, and the misery of *samsāric* existence which the brahmin concentrates upon.

Through being overcome by desire and anger, and through greed and delusion, I have attained disagreeable and miserable ends from my indulgence in sin. ... Repeatedly I have been separated from the agreeable (and) brought together with the disagreeable. I have incurred the loss of wealth, that wealth having been attained with suffering. (I have incurred) contempt and great misery from kinsmen and others, and also very terrible pain, mental and physical. And I have undergone severe humiliations, and terrible bondage and death; and also falls into hell, and tortures in the abode of Yama. (I have) continually (incurred) old age and diseases, and various abodes; (and) in this world, I have experienced the severities born of the pairs of opposites.²

Ultimately the brahmin had become saturated with the misery and suffering of worldly existence, with its constant movement and change, and lack of any permanence. 'Nowhere', he explained, 'is there happiness without end; nowhere can one abide permanently.'³ And, then, 'one day - from disgust and humiliation - overcome

1) We may presume that this is not the Kaçyapa of the Seven Seers.

2) Açubhā gatayaḥ prāptāḥ kaṣṭhā me pāpasevanāt/
Kāmamanyuparītena tṛṣṇayā mohitena ca// (30)
Priyairvivāso bahuṣaḥ saṃvāsaçcāpriyair saha/
Dhananāçça saṃprāpto labdhvā duḥkhena taddhanam// (33)
Avamānāḥ sukaṣṭhāçça parataḥ svajanāttathā/
Çarīrā mānasāçcāpi vedanā bhr̥çadāruṇāḥ//
Prāptā vimānanāçcogrā vadhabandhāçça dāruṇāḥ/
Patanam niraye caiva yātanāçça yamakṣaye//
Jarā rogāçça satataṃ vāsanāni ca bhūriṣaḥ/
Loke asminnanubhūtanī dvaṇdvajāni bhr̥çaṃ mayā// Āçvamedhikaparvan, 16.30 & 33-36.

3) Na kvacitsukhamatyantaṃ na kvacicchāçvatī sthitiḥ/ *ibid.*, 16.29.

and afflicted with very great suffering, I abandoned the course of the world. Thereupon, I attained this success through serenity of soul." Having attained this highest success (*siddhiruttamā*) he would not have to come to this world again. Instead, he would go to the undisturbed abode of *Brahman* (*brahmaṇaḥ padamavyagraṃ*); and thus attain the permanent rest that was so desired but so lacking in earthly existence.²

After listening to this brief autobiography, Kaçyapa asks the brahmin various questions on karma and transmigration which, according to Kṛṣṇa, were very hard to answer (*praçnānsudurvacān*):

How does the body perish? And also, how is (a body) attained? And how is the transmigrating (soul) freed from the miserable cycle of birth and death? How, having joined itself to nature, does (the soul) relinquish that body? And, freed from that body, how does (the soul) attain another? And how does a man experience the good and bad deeds done by him? (And) where do the deeds exist of one without a body?³

However, pertinent and interesting as these questions are, it seems that the brahmin only deals with issues arising from three of them: the death of the body, the attainment of another body, and the mechanism of rebirth.

The brahmin first describes the physiology of corporeal death. Thus at the approach of death the intellect begins to deviate (*buddhirvyāvartate*) or be deficient; and the individual then performs acts that are contrary to physical well-being and life. Sometimes he eats to excess, and other times not at all; and he eats food of a kind that is hostile and harmful to life and body. He indulges in physical and sexual activity to excess, and does not attend to his proper bodily needs. Through this behaviour he ultimately catches disease, ending in his death (*rogaṃ*

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- 1) *Tataḥ kadācinnirvedānnikārānnikṛtena ca/
Lokatantraṃ parityaktaṃ duḥkhārtena bhr̥ṣaṃ mayā/
Tataḥ siddhīriyaṃ prāptā prasādādātmano mayā// ibid., 16.37.*
 - 2) *Ibid., 16.13-43.*
 - 3) *Kathaṃ çarīraṃ cyavate kathaṃ caivopapadyate/
Kathaṃ kaṣṭhācca saṃsārātsaṃsaranparimucyate//
Ātmānaṃ vā kathaṃ yuktṃ taccharīraṃ vimuñcati/
Çarīrataçca nirmuktaḥ kathamanyatprapadyate//
Kathaṃ çubhāçubhe cāyaṃ karmaṇī svakṛte naraḥ/
Upabhuñkte kva vā karma videhasyopatiṣṭhati// ibid., 17.2-4.*

labhate maraṇāntikam); and the dissolution of his living body (*jantoḥ ṣarīrāc-cyavate*).¹

The brahmin then provides a step-by-step account of the death and dissolution of the body; and of the departure of the *jīva*.² According to the brahmin, the critical element in the dissolving away of the human body is the action of the wind; the importance of which in human physiology became a detailed and technical subject in parts of Indian literature, particularly medical literature.³ Thus, according to Caraka:

It (the wind) becomes the determining cause of the prolongation of life when it is not excited. But when, in truth, it is excited in the body it inflicts on the body all sorts of derangements, to the detrimental forces of colour, of well-being, and longevity. It puts in tumult the mind, attacks all the faculties, throws down the embryos, provokes malformation, makes it go on for too long a time, engenders fright, chagrin, bewilderment, sadness, loquacity, and blocks the breaths.⁴

In similar fashion the brahmin explains that as the individual is gripped by dissolution, the wind in the body becomes disordered and agitated, distributing heat and pain throughout the body. This restrains the movement of the vital breaths, whereupon the soul leaves the dying body.

Moved by the severity of the wind, the heat in the body becomes agitated. It moves round the body (and) impedes all the vital breaths. The heat, which is very powerful, becomes greatly agitated in the body. It pierces those vital parts (which form) the receptacle of the *jīva*; know (this). Thereupon, the *jīva*, suffering pain, flows forth (and) departs at once. When the vital parts are pierced, the 'creature' (i.e. the *jīva*), seized with pain, abandons the body; know that, O best of twice-born ones. All beings repeatedly move to and fro through birth and death.⁵

1) *Ibid.*, 17.1-14.

2) Compare the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*'s account of death upon which the author of this account seems to draw. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, 4.3.35 - 4.4.

3) See Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna* 12, and *Suṣruta*, *Nidānasthāna* 1, parts of which are translated in J. Filliozat, *The Classical Doctrine of Indian Medicine*, pp.196 ff.

4) Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna*, 12.8 in *ibid.*, p.200.

5) *Uṣmā prakupitaḥ kāye tivravāyusamīritaḥ/
Ṣarīramanuparyeti sarvānprāṇānruṇaddhi vai//
Atyarthaṃ balavānūṣmā ṣarīre parikopitaḥ/
Bhinatti jīvasthānāni tāni marmāṇi viddhi ca//
Tataḥ savedanaḥ sadyo jīvaḥ pracyavate kṣaran/
Ṣarīraṃ tyajate jantuṣchidyamāneṣu marmasu/
Vedanābhiḥ paritātmā tadviddhi dvijasattama//
Jātimaraṇasaṃvignāḥ satataṃ sarvajantavaḥ/ *ibid.*, 17.15-18.*

Then a final violent movement of the wind breaks apart the union of the five elements; and the wind, which resides within the vital breaths called *prāṇa* and *apāna*,¹ rushes upwards and abandons the body. The man breathes no more, and the body is destitute of heat, beauty and consciousness. With the *jīva*, the wind and the life-breaths gone, the person is now dead.

Then, moved by a (final) violent wind, (the wind) in the body, agitated through coldness, inserts itself into the union of the five elements. That wind - which is dependent on the (vital breaths called) *prāṇa* and *apāna*, within the five elements - goes upwards (and) leaves the embodied creature, having freed itself from a wretched state. Just so does (the wind) leave behind the body; and breathlessness is seen. (The body) is (left) without heat, breath and beauty, and destitute of consciousness. Abandoned by *Brahman*, the man is (now) said to be dead.²

The brahmin then immediately adds what might be considered as additional details to the above, or more probably another account of the death process.

When these vital parts are pierced, then (the soul) rising up enters the heart of the creature (and) at once arrests the life essence. Then, the creature, conscious (still), does not perceive at all. Now, when the vital parts are suppressed, the consciousness (of the creature) becomes enveloped in darkness. (And) the soul, without anything to stand on, moves with the wind. Then, after breathing a long and very painful breath, (the soul), departing quickly, causes the inanimate body to tremble.³

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- 1) The four breaths, according to Suçruta in the *Nidānasthāna*, 1.11ff, are (1) upward breath (*prāṇa*), which sustains the body and the other breaths and draws nourishment into the body; (2) downward breath (*apāna*), which governs the movement of excreta, urine, sperm, embryo and menses; (3) concentrated breath (*samāna*), which, in cooperation with fire, digests the nourishment and separates it into various substances; and (4) diffused breath (*vyāna*), which transports the life essence, produces perspiration, causes blood to circulate, and diffuses it throughout the body. Cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, 3.9.26, 4.2.4; *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 203.15-27.
- 2) Yathā pañcasu bhūteṣu saṃçrītatvaṃ nigacchatī/
 Çaityātprakupitaḥ kāye tīvravāyusamīritaḥ//
 Yaḥ sa pañcasu bhūteṣu prāṇāpāne vyavasthitaḥ/
 Sa gacchatyūrdhvago vāyuh kṛcchrānmuktṛvā çarīraṇam//
 Çarīraṃ ca jahātyeva nirucchvāsaçca dṛçyate/
 Nirūṣmā sa nirucchvāso niḥçrīko gatacetanah//
 Brahmanā saṃparityakto mṛta ityucyate narah/ *ibid.*, 17.20-23.
 Presumably here the *jīva* is identified with the eternal Brahman.
- 3) Teṣu marmasu bhinneṣu tataḥ sa samudīrayan/
 Āviçya hrdayaṃ jantoḥ sattvaṃ cāçu ruṇaddhi vai/
 Tataḥ sa cetano janturnābhijānāti kiṃcana//
 Tamasā saṃvṛtajñānaḥ saṃvṛteṣvatha marmasu/
 Sa jīvo niradhiṣṭhānaçcāvyate mātariçvanā//
 Tataḥ sa taṃ mahocchvāsaṃ bhr̥çamucchvāsyā dāruṇam/
 Niṣkrāmankampayatyāçu taccharīramacetanam// *ibid.*, 17.25-27.

In other words, when the vital organs of the body are damaged, the soul enters the heart, and there restrains the essential being or nature of the individual. The individual becomes comatosed, or conscious though not aware. The consciousness, too, is overwhelmed; and after the body makes one final long and painful breath, the *jīva* rapidly departs, and the individual is dead.

The brahmin then considers the lot of the soul after the death of the body. At this stage, he notes, only brahmins having the eye of knowledge (*jñānacakṣuṣaḥ*) and who are perfected (*siddha*) are able to perceive with their spiritual vision (*divyena cakṣuṣā*) the soul as it leaves the body and attains to a new birth. The *jīva* that has departed the body is surrounded by its own deeds (*karmabhīḥ svaiḥ samāvṛtaḥ*), be these deeds auspicious (*ṣubhaiḥ*), virtuous (*puṇyaiḥ*), or evil (*papaiḥ*). And, as the theory of karma requires, the fate of the soul is determined by the nature of these deeds; all acts yield their appropriate consequences that must be requited, if not in this world then in heaven or hell. As the brahmin explains, performing deeds good or bad, all embodied creatures attain the fruit (*labhante sarvadehinaḥ*). And because of their own deeds, creatures attain even here on earth enjoyments both high and low (*īhaivoccāvacānbhogānprāpnuvanti*). As well, doers of evil deeds (*aṣubhakarmā*) go to hell, where, hanging downwards, these evil men are cooked severely (*pāpo mānavaḥ pacyate bhr̥ṣam*). On the other hand, doers of virtuous deeds (*puṇyakarmaṇām*) go above to the stellar worlds (*tārārūpāṇi*) or to the lunar (*candramaṇḍalam*) or solar disc (*sūryamaṇḍalam*). But, through the diminution of their virtuous karma, they all repeatedly fall away from these heavenly worlds. Heaven, it is important to note, is not for this brahmin a world of unlimited joy. Thus he adds that even in heaven there is a distinction of inferior, superior and middling happiness (*viṣeṣo asti divi nīcoccamadhyamaḥ*); and those in heaven who see prosperity more brilliant than their own (*dīptatarāṃ ṣriyam*) are dissatisfied (*na ... samtoṣo*).¹

After its sojourn in heaven or hell, the *jīva* is compelled to return to

1) *Ibid.*, 17.29-38.

transmigration because of the continuing effects of previous acts that have not been requited in former lives or in heaven or hell. Contrary to the views of much of the *Mahābhārata* and popular Hinduism, the brahmin explains: 'There is no destruction here of acts, whether good or bad. Upon the attainment of body after body (these acts) ripen in like manner.'¹ Thus, what is done with a pure mind (*çuddhena manasā kṛtam*) will produce abundant merit (*syādvipulam puṇyam*). Similarly, what is done with an evil mind (*pāpena manasā kṛtam*) will produce evil (*pāpam ... syāt*).²

Then the brahmin describes how the soul again attains a body, and the new foetus comes to be (*upapattim ... garbhasya*).³ At conception the individual, overwhelmed by desire and anger (*kāma manyusamāvṛtaḥ*), enters the womb as determined by his acts (*karmasamādiṣṭam ... naro garbham praviṣati*). The vital seed, mixed with the blood of the female (*çukram çonitasamrṣṭam striyā*), enters the womb (*garbhāçayam gatam*); and there it gains a body which is born of its previous acts, whether good or bad. However, because of its subtle and unmanifest state (*saukṣmyādavyaktabhāvāt*), it is never attached to the corporeal body. Nevertheless, as eternal *Brahman* (*brahma çāçvatam*) it is the seed of all creatures, and the means by which they live. Thus, the *jīva* enters all parts of the foetus in the same way as molten iron takes the shape of a mould. And just as fire brings heat to a lump of iron, so does the *jīva* bring consciousness and life to all parts of the foetus.⁴

Once in this new form, whatever deeds, whether good or bad, that have been done in former bodies must certainly be experienced (*avaçyamupabhuçyate*). As a result, former deeds are exhausted (*kṣīyate*); but in the meantime other deeds accumulate (*anyatpracīyate*), so long as he fails to discern the duties which lead to mokṣa or liberation.⁵

The brahmin then discusses the conduct of the good (*satām vṛttam*). By the

1) Çubhānāmaçubhānām ca neha nāço asti karmaṇām/

Prāpya prāpya tu pacyante kṣetram kṣetram tathā tathā// *ibid.*, 18.1.

2) *Ibid.*, 18.2-3.

3) *Ibid.*, 17.39.

4) *Ibid.*, 18.4-9.

5) *Ibid.*, 18.11-12.

pursuit of these virtues, the soul becomes happy (*sukhī bhavati*) in the course of its repeated births. The assorted virtues listed are basic to the orthodox brāhmanic tradition and include making gifts, performing austerities (*tapas*), the practice of *brahmacarya* or celibacy, the fulfillment of prescribed religious observances, self-control, tranquillity, sympathy with all creatures, restraint, abstention from injury, not taking the property of others, avoidance of falsehood, obedience to parents, the honouring of gods and guests, adoration of one's *guru*, compassion, purity, restraint of the senses, and the advancement of virtuous action. All this constitutes the conduct of doers of good.¹

However, the brahmin adds, *yogins* who are liberated must still be distinguished from these doers of good. Nevertheless, prior devotion to the conduct of the good is essential for *yogins*; for deliverance from *samsāra* (*samsāratāraṇam*) occurs only after a long time (*kālena mahatā*) and only of those who act in accordance with virtue (*virtamānasya dharmeṇa puruṣasya*).² It is, though, proper knowledge that ultimately liberates one from transmigration - and it is the nature of this saving knowledge that occupies most of the remainder of the *Anugītā*.

These, then, are the only substantial discussions of karma and transmigration in the whole enormous bulk of the *Mahābhārata*; though their comparative scarcity is certainly not due to lack of opportunity. Equally, there are many intellectual and philosophical difficulties concerning karma and *samsāra* that the *Mahābhārata* seems to leave quite untouched. One obvious difficulty is explaining or accounting for how each soul finds its way into a womb which will give it rebirth in a family whose moral, social and religious standing is commensurate with the soul's accumulated deeds. In the *Mahābhārata*, the process is simply assumed. Nor is the exact nature of karmic consequences closely considered. It is not consistently apparent from the *Mahābhārata* whether the karmic consequences of acts are of a moral nature only or

1) *Ibid.*, 18.14-17.

2) *Ibid.*, 18.20-21.

of a quasi-physical nature. Some parts of the *Mahābhārata* look upon karma as merely a merit or demerit, a moral debt that is to be paid or rewarded. Other parts look upon it as almost a physical substance that is carried along with the soul as it transmigrates from one body to another. Nor is there any examination of the empirical validity of the doctrines.

Possibly the Epic bards felt that such subtleties and complexities would tax the intellectual resources of their more popular audience; but then many parts of the *Mokṣadharmā*, *Anugītā*, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Sanatsujāta* would certainly be no less demanding. Possibly the sages themselves did not know how to answer these questions. It may be significant that the enlightened brahmin only answers some of Kaṣyapa's queries, just as Mārkaṇḍeya only answers some of Yudhiṣṭhira's.

Substantial examinations of the doctrines of karma and *samsāra* in the *Mahābhārata* are thus few. Nevertheless, if the above sections were excised from the text, it would still be apparent to a reader that these doctrines existed - even if their nature was even less clear than it already is - for they are called upon or referred to in various other circumstances in the *Mahābhārata*.

It is not infrequent for karma to be called upon to explain misfortune or a reverse of circumstances; and indeed, this is supposed to be one of the strong points of the doctrine. We have already seen how Mārkaṇḍeya consoles the grieving Yudhiṣṭhira along these lines at a particularly low point during their exile. On another occasion, just after their arrival in the forest, it is the wise brahmin Ṣaunaka, well versed in *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*, who provides the same service, though much more briefly. Ṣaunaka describes to Yudhiṣṭhira the terrible consequences of desire and passion as exercised through the senses in their ceaseless search for sense objects.

Thus, possessed by passion and delusion (*moharāgasamākrāntaḥ*) and under the power of the sense objects (*indriyārthavaṣānugaḥ*), the fool (*aprājñāḥ*) seeks only the pleasures relating to belly and penis (*çiṇḍodarakṛte*). Even the man who is aware of them is overpowered and carried away (*hriyate*) by these captivating senses

(*hāribhirindriyaiḥ*), just as an unconscious charioteer is carried away by roguish horses that are agitated. So when a person's mind is directed towards the objects of all the senses, desire (*autsukyaṃ*) rises up and activity is produced. Then pierced by desire (*kāmena*) and by the arrows of sense objects (*viṣayeṣubhiḥ*), he falls into the fire of greed (*patati lobhāgnau*) like the moth because of its greed for light (*jyotirlobhātpatamgavat*). And, continued Çaunaka:

Then, O lord of people, stupefied with pleasures and food, he sinks into the jaws of madness (and) knows not himself. Thus he falls here into womb after womb in the cycle of rebirth; (and) by thirst, *karman* and ignorance he is now whirled round like a wheel. He rolls round in creatures from Brahmā down to a blade of grass, being born again and again in water, on land or in the air.¹

At the very least Çaunaka assures Yudhiṣṭhira that his enemies, who certainly were possessed by passion and delusion, would eventually reap their karmic due; and that if Yudhiṣṭhira adopted the way of detachment and indifference, he could overcome suffering and misery.²

In similar fashion, the great sage Vyāsa, with apparent reference to Yudhiṣṭhira's enemies, comforts the sorrowing King of Dharma with the thought that 'People who are addicted to lawlessness (*adharma*), deluded and devoted to the ways of animals, attain to a wretched womb and do not find happiness. Whatever act is done here, that (act) will be experienced in the hereafter.'³

However, as an explanation for suffering the doctrine of karma is distinctly double-edged. While it may console the 'victim' with the thought that his enemies will ultimately attain their deserved punishment, it also requires him to accept that his own plight is due to his own past misdeeds. However, it is noteworthy that whatever consolation Yudhiṣṭhira may have taken from such advice, he himself does

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- 1) Tato vihārairāhārairmohitaṣṭa viṣāṃ pate/
 Mahāmohamukhe magno nātmānamavabudhyate//
 Evaṃ patati saṃsāre tāsu tāsviha yoniṣu/
 Avidyākarmatṛṣṇābhirbhrāmyamāṇo atha cakravat//
 Brahmādiṣu tṛṇānteṣu bhūteṣu parivartate/
 Jale bhuvi tathākāṇḍe jāyamāṇaḥ punaḥ punaḥ// Āraṇyakaparvan, 2.66-68.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 2.60-79.
- 3) Adharmarucayo mūḍhāstiryaggatiparāyaṇāḥ/
 Kṛcchrāṃ yonīmanuprāpya na sukhaṃ vindate janāḥ//
 Iha yatkriyate karma tatparatropabhuḥjyate/ *ibid.*, 245.18-19.

not seem to have viewed his own troubled situation in karmic terms. Though he is beset by feelings of guilt and despair concerning his actions and desires in this life, at no stage are there any tears of remorse over how the actions and desires of previous lives may have brought about his current lot.

This, though, is not to say that Yudhiṣṭhira is unaware of the effect of past deeds on current life. For when Saṁjaya, his peace mission finished, is about to take leave of the Pāṇḍavas to return to the court of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Yudhiṣṭhira bids him take return greetings for just about everyone possible. To the blind, the aged, and to the many who live by their hands, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Saṁjaya to tell them: 'Fear not (this) miserable life with its suffering; assuredly (it is due to) evil done in former worlds.'¹

There are other occasions when karma and transmigration are cited as an explanation for misfortune. Thus Kuntī cites to King Pāṇḍu the story of King Vyūṣitāçva who dies of consumption (*yakṣman*) consequent upon lusting after (*kāmasaṁmatto*) his wife, Queen Bhadrā. She was duly overcome by the greatest grief, more particularly as she was left without any sons, and she lamented to the body of her dead husband: 'With my misfortune, surely in previous bodies (I must have) parted companions or separated the united, O Prince. This suffering, O King, occasioned by my separation from you, (has) piled up (and) befallen me because of (my) evil deeds in former bodies.'²

A more extreme example occurs in the *çalyaparvan* where the river Sarasvatī is cursed by Viçvāmitra to flow with blood. And soon she became infested with *rākṣasas* who lived there happily guzzling her red current. However, the sight much distressed a group of *ṛṣis* who came there on a tour of the *tīrthas*, or holy fords, and they

1) Mā bhaiṣṭa duḥkhena kujīvitena

nūnaṁ kūtaṁ paralokeṣu pāpam/ Udyogaparvan, 30.40.

2) Abhāgyayā mayā nūnaṁ viyuktāḥ sahaçārīṇaḥ/

Samyogā viprayuktā vā pūrvadeheṣu pārthiva//

Tadidaṁ karmabhiḥ pāpaiḥ pūrvadeheṣu saṁcitam/

Duḥkham āmanusaṁprāptaṁ rājanstvadviprayogajam// Ādiparvan, 112.25-26; also 112.7-26.

released the river from her terrible curse. But the hunger stricken *rākṣasas* beseeched the *ṛṣis*: 'For we are hungry and we have deviated from the eternal *dharma*. That we are doers of evil is not of our free-will. Through the want of your grace, and because of (our) evil acts this side of ourselves increases, wherefore (we have) indeed (become) *brahmarākṣasas*. So amongst *vaiṣyas*, *çūdras* and *kṣatriyas*, those who hate brahmins, they become *rākṣasas* in this world.' Therefore those brahmin *ṛṣis* allocated to the *rākṣasas* various kinds of polluted foods. And then bathing in that *tīrtha* on the *Sarasvatī*, the *rākṣasas* renounced their bodies and went to heaven.²

After the end of the great battle with its all but total destruction, the theory of karma is called upon by Vidura to explain to Dhṛtarāṣṭra his own particular misfortunes. For a father in the *Mahābhārata*, the greatest of tragedies is to lose a son. Dhṛtarāṣṭra has one hundred sons to lose and loses them all, and naturally his grief is great. At the opening to the *Strīparvan*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief prompts him to again reflect on his own part in the tragedy. Whereas before the battle Dhṛtarāṣṭra only ever spoke of Time, fate and destiny, he now rather hesitatingly contemplates the idea that evil deeds in previous births may account for his suffering. 'I do not remember, O Saṃjaya, any evil act of mine in former times, the fruit of which is now experienced here by my foolish self. (But) assuredly I have done some offence in previous births, for which the Ordainer has joined me to this unfortunate destiny.'³ However, in the very next breath, Dhṛtarāṣṭra again cites fate (*daivayogād*) as the cause of this great destruction that has brought misery to him.⁴

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- 1) Vayaṃ hi kṣudhitāṣṭaiva dharmāddhīnāṣṭa ṣāṣvatāt/
 Na ca naḥ kāmakāro ayaṃ yadvayaṃ pāpakāriṇaḥ//
 Yuṣmākaṃ cāprasādena duṣkṛtena ca karmaṇā/
 Pakṣo ayaṃ vardhate asmākaṃ yataḥ sma brahmarākṣasāḥ//
 Evaṃ hi vaiṣyaçūdrāṇāṃ kṣatriyāṇāṃ tathaiva ca/
 Ye brāhmaṇānpradviṣanti te bhavantiha rākṣasāḥ// Çalyaparvan, 42.15-17.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 42.1-25.
- 3) Na smarāmyātmanaḥ kiṃcitpurā saṃjaya duṣkṛtaṃ/
 Yasyedaṃ phalamadyeḥa mayā mūḍhena bhuḃjate//
 Nūnaṃ hyapakṛtaṃ kiṃcinmayā pūrveṣu janmasu/
 Yena mām duḥkhabhāgeṣu dhātā karmasu yuktavān// Strīparvan, 1.17-18.
- 4) *Ibid.*, 1.19.

As usual, at such times, the wise Vidura steps in to console his half-brother with words of wisdom. Vidura first argues that Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not grieve for the dead, for this was in any case the allotted end of all creatures: everything ends in destruction, life ends in death, and if the scriptures were authoritative those killed in battle would have attained heaven. Expanding his argument, Vidura explains that all life consists of ups-and-downs, which are the result of karma.

As a man takes off an old garment and chooses another new garment, so does the embodied (soul) with bodies. O son of Vicitravīrya, creatures attain in this world, because of their own acts alone, a sojourn of happiness or suffering. By acts one attains heaven, O Bhārata, or happiness or suffering. Then one bears the burden, whether unwilling or willing.¹

This burden is endured in yet another birth, which is described in terms of pollution and suffering. In the beginning the new creature finds its origins in the blood of the female and the semen of the male; and then it grows little by little taking on the shape of a foetus with all its limbs. And there it lives in the midst of impurity, besmeared with flesh and blood (*amedhyamadhye vasati māṁsaṣoṇitalepane*) until by the force of the wind (*vāyuvegena*) its legs are turned upwards (*ūrdhvapādo*) and its head downwards (*adhaḥṣīrāḥ*). Then,

Accompanied by its former acts, (this creature) approaches the entrance of the womb because of the pressure of the uterus, (and) meets with numerous miseries. Thereupon, free (from the womb) it experiences other misfortunes because of the cycle of transmigration. These graspers (i.e. the misfortunes) go to him like dogs towards meat.²

This creature is bound by the fetters of the senses (*baddhamindriyapāṣais*), for, bemoans Vidura: 'Alas, (this) world is injured and reduced to subjection by greed.

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- 1) Yathā jīrṇamajīrṇaṃ vā vastraṃ tyaktvā tu vai naraḥ/
 Anyadrocyate vastramevaṃ dehāḥ ṣarīrīṇām//
 Vācitravīrya vāsaṃ hī duḥkhaṃ vā yadī vā sukhaṃ/
 Prāpnuvanti bhūtāni svakṛtenaiva karmaṇā//
 Karmaṇā prāpyate svargaṃ sukhaṃ duḥkhaṃ ca bhārata/
 Tato vahati taṃ bhāramavaṣaḥ svavaṣo api vā// *ibid.*, 3.6-8.
- 2) Yonidvāramupāgāmya bahūṅkleṣānsamṛcchati/
 Yonisampīḍanāccaiva pūrvakarmabhiranvitaḥ//
 Tasmānmuktaḥ sa saṃsārādanyānpaṣyatyupadravān/
 Grahāstamupasarpanti sārameyā ivāmiṣam// *ibid.*, 4.5-6.

Drunk with passion through greed and anger, one knows not one's own self."¹

Consequently, he is approached by manifold distresses (*vyasanāny ... vividhāni*) until at last 'Dragged along by the messengers of Yama he goes to death at the appointed time.'²

Release from the recurring cycle of birth, death, and misery was to be obtained by proper understanding or knowledge of its true nature;³ and this in turn would lead to self-restraint, renunciation and the search for *Brahman*. As Vidura explained: 'Self-restraint, renunciation, and carefulness are the three horses of *Brahman*.'⁴

Presumably, though, Vidura's words of wisdom had little effect upon Dhṛtarāṣṭra. For as Vidura finishes, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, stricken with grief on account of the death of his sons, fainted away and fell on the ground.⁵ If King Dhṛtarāṣṭra had taken Vidura's words about karma to heart, it seems likely that he saw himself more as the victim of his karma, than as the deserving recipient.

This, certainly, is how Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife Gāndhārī sees her own misfortunes. After the battle Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court, with all its weeping widows, and the Pāṇḍavas, repair to the battlefield and witness a sight of terrible carnage. There follow scenes of bewailing and hysterical women searching for their beloved ones, fighting with the beasts of prey for their remains, or trying to reconstruct husbands from the bits and pieces that lie around. Gāndhārī describes the terrible scene to Kṛṣṇa and laments 'Assuredly, I must have perpetrated evil in previous births (as) I see slain sons, grandsons, and brothers, O Keçava.'⁶

One of the most attractive tales in the entire Epic also ultimately explains misfortune in terms of karma. This tale or *itihāsa* concerns a conversation between

1) Aho vinikṛto loko lobhena ca vaçikṛtaḥ/

Lobhakrodhamadonmatto nātmānamavabudhyate// *ibid.*, 4.11.

2) Yamadūtairvikṛṣyañça mṛtyuṃ kālena gacchati// *ibid.*, 4.9.

3) *Ibid.*, 6.4; and the parable of life related by Vidura in *ibid.*, 5-6.

4) Damastyāgo apramādaçca te trayo brahmaṇo hayāḥ// *ibid.*, 7.19.

5) *Ibid.*, 8.1.

6) Nūnamācaritaṃ pāpaṃ mayā pūrveṣu janmasu/

Yā paçyāmi hatānputrānpautrānbhrātṛñça keçava/ *ibid.*, 16.59; also 18.11-12.

the saintly Gautamī, a hunter, a snake, Death and Time. Gautamī was an old and pious brahmin lady who one day found her son dead, bitten by a snake. Meanwhile a hunter (*lubdhaka*) named Arjunaka had caught the offending snake and brought it before Gautamī. Should this snake, he asked, be thrown into the fire or cut into pieces? For such an evil slayer of a child (*bālahā pāpas*) did not deserve to live long. But Gautamī considered the hunter to lack understanding, and bade him set the snake free. Killing the snake would not revive her son, and the hunter would merely incur sin for this destruction of a living creature. The hunter (being a hunter after all), objected that it was quite natural, even meritorious, to kill one's enemy, and cited the example of Indra's destruction of Vṛtra. The snake was evil (*pāpam*) and she should remove her grief by its destruction. Gautamī, though, persisted. The death of her son was preordained (*nityāyasto bālahano na cāsti*); there was nothing to be gained by the destruction of an enemy; and it was *dharma* to which they should be devoted (*dharmārāmaḥ*). Therefore, they should forgive the snake and set it free.'

Then the snake, painfully fettered, joined the conversation. The snake denied all fault, for it was Death (*mṛtyu*) who had used him as a mere instrument for the destruction of the boy. If there was fault it was Deaths. 'O foolish Arjunaka, what is my fault here? For Death impelled me - (I was) powerless (and) without freedom. I have bitten this (child) because of his command, (and) not through anger or desire; if sin is found, O hunter, that sin is his.'² The hunter and the snake then heatedly disputed as to whether the snake was still to blame or not; at which point Death appeared and absolved both himself and the snake from blame. For everything that took place, happened because of Time (*kāla*).

As the wind drives the clouds hither and thither, in the same way - like the clouds - I follow the will of Time. ... All (creatures), mobile or immobile, whether in heaven or earth, depend on Time. O snake, this universe depends on

1) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 1.1-25.

2) Ko nvarjunaka doṣo atra vidyate mama bāliṣa/
 Asvatantṛaṃ hi mām mṛtyurvivaṣaṃ yadacūcudat//
 Tasyāyaṃ vacanāddaṣṭo na kopena na kāmyayā/
 Tasya tatkilbiṣaṃ lubdha vidyate yadi kilbiṣaṃ// *ibid.*, 1.28-29.

Time. In this universe, action and renunciation and modifications of these - all are declared to be dependent on Time.¹

Therefore, though he had impelled the snake to bite the boy, he himself had been driven on by Kāla (*kālenāhaṃ prapuditaḥ*).

Now, while the hunter insisted that the snake and Death were both blameable and should be killed, Kāla also made an appearance, and declared:

Neither I, nor Mrtyu, nor this Snake, O hunter, are guilty in the death of creatures; for we are not the instigators. What acted (was) this (boy's) karma; that, O Arjunaka, was (what) impelled us. This (boy) was killed by his own karma; there is no other cause of his death. ... As light and shade are always very tightly bound together, so is the doer bound to (his) karma, through his own deeds.²

Gautamī then accepted that her son had met with death as a result of his own karma; and added that she too had so acted that her son had died. Kāla, Mrtyu, and the snake returned to their respective abodes, while Gautamī was consoled and the hunter pacified.³

In this story, the gravest of misfortunes (the death of a son) has taken place, and a series of more obvious culprits, all of which are external to the individual, are paraded before the listener and accused of guilt. In the end, the aggrieved accept that it is karma - the individual's own actions - that is the cause.

However, as we shall see, on many (if not most) occasions the Epic does prefer to pin the blame for misfortune on causes which are external to the individual, and which are quite incompatible with notions of karma. In fact, the moral that Bhīṣma draws from the story for Yudhiṣṭhira's benefit is telling. He first advises

-
- 1) Yathā vāyurjaladharānvikaṣṭi tatastataḥ/
Tadvajjaladavatsarpa kālasyāhaṃ vaçānugaḥ// (44)
Jaṅgamāḥ sthāvarāçcaiva divi vā yadi vā bhuvi/
Sarve kālātmakāḥ sarpa kālātmakāmidaṃ jagat// (46)
Pravṛttayaçca yā loke tathaiva ca nivṛttayaḥ/
Tāsāṃ vikṛtayo yāçca sarvaṃ kālātmakaṃ smṛtam// (47) *ibid.*, 1.44 & 46-47.
- 2) Naivāhaṃ nāpyayaṃ mṛtyurnāyaṃ lubdhaka paṇnagaḥ/
Kilbiṣi jantumaraṇe na vayaṃ hi prayojakāḥ// (63)
Akarodyadayaṃ karma tanno arjunaka codakam/
Praṇāçaheturnānyo asya vadhyate ayaṃ svakarmanā// (64)
Yathā chāyātapau nityaṃ susambaddhau nirantaram/
Tathā karma ca kartā ca sambaddhāvātmakarmabhīḥ// (68) *ibid.*, 1.63-64 & 68.
- 3) *Ibid.*, 1.1-73.

Yudhiṣṭhira that he should forsake grief for in the triple-world the cause of anything is one's own karma (*svakarmapratyayān*); but in the very next verse Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that the terrible slaughter was not made by Duryodhana or by Yudhiṣṭhira himself. This slaughter of kings was done by Time (*kālena tatkr̥tam*).¹

It is significant that much as the orthodox may sermonise about karma and transmigration, the characters do not for the most part seem to take its message to heart. There are no instances in the *Mahābhārata* where a character, beset by misfortune, beats his breast and sheds tears of woe over past evils. As noted, Yudhiṣṭhira certainly does not. And nor does his mother Kuntī - though such might be expected - when at one of the darkest moments of the Epic she looks upon her sons and Draupadī, all dressed in ascetic garb for their exile after the traumatic dicing. The best she can do is to see their suffering not in terms of karma but in terms of 'perverse fate' and 'evil destiny':

Adorned by your steadfastness in observance and conduct in accordance with virtuous *dharma*, never mean, unwavering in devotion, and always intent on worship of the gods, (then) why should this misfortune befall you - what is this perverse fate? And whose is this fault, born of malice, (that) I see you so? But this may be my own evil destiny (for) it was I who gave birth to you.²

Besides being called upon to explain suffering and misfortune, there are frequent references to the theories of karma and transmigration in the didactic and philosophical sections of the *Mahābhārata*, the bulk of which are contained in the massive *Çāntī*, *Anuṣāsana* and *Āraṇyakaparvans*, as well as the small but self-contained treatises, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Anugītā*.

However, it is important to note and significant that the bulk of these references are to be found in the *Mokṣadharma* section of the *Çāntiparvan*. There are probably more references here than in all other parts of the *Mahābhārata* combined.

1) *Ibid.*, 1.74-75.

2) Kathaṃ saddharmacāritravṛttasthitivibhūṣitān/
Akṣudrāndr̥ghabhaktāṅga daivatejyāparānsadā//
Vyasanam vaḥ samabhyāgātko ayaṃ vidhiviparyayaḥ/
Kasyāpadhyānaṃ cedamāgaḥ paçyāmi vo dhiyā//
Syāttu madbhāgyadoṣo ayaṃ yāhaṃ yuṣmānājījanam/ Sabhāparvan, 70.13-15.

As we shall see, in the remainder of the *Çānti*, *Anuçāsana*, and *Āraṇyakaparvans* the concern is much more with escaping the consequences of one's sinful acts than in a true adherence to the principles of the doctrine of karma, although the *Mokṣadharmā* certainly isn't free of these concerns either.

Whatsmore, it is notable that while the *Mokṣadharmā* may clearly outline the essential principles of karma and transmigration,¹ it does not dwell upon these doctrines for their own sake.² They would seem to be much more secondary to its principal concern with teaching the doctrine of *mokṣa*, or 'liberation' from bondage to this world of suffering, with its limitations of time, space and change.³ And, of course, the most notable manifestations of this bondage, and its consequent suffering, are the facts of karma and *saṃsāra*. Therefore, the *Mokṣadharmā* is really interested in these doctrines from a negative point of view. That is, the horrors of worldly existence, characterised by karma and transmigration, are emphasised as a way of putting the necessary purpose and resolve into the individual seeker's mind to pursue the hard labour of *mokṣa*. If you like, the doctrines of karma and transmigration are used to soften up the seeker.

Outside of the *Mokṣadharmā*, clear and unchallenged references to the doctrine of karma - beyond those already discussed - are infrequent, and with one or two exceptions add little to our knowledge of the Epic view of karma. The most important and significant of these references is to be found in that brief text of Upaniṣadic intent, the *Sanatsujāta*, which accumulated a sufficient philosophical reputation for even a *Çaṃkara* to write a commentary on it.⁴

1) e.g. *Çāntiparvan*, 174.1-16, 180.1-27, 183.16, 194.21, 195.8-23, 196.23, 203.41-43, 204.7-13, 206.11, 216.13, 270.18-19, 277.15-16, 279.9-21, 309.50-59, 316.25-58.

2) See, though, the curious doctrine of the colour of souls, which is probably of Jainist origin. *Ibid.*, 195.17-23, 271.1 ff, 280.4-5; and V.M. Bedekar, 'The Doctrine of the Colours of Souls in the *Mahābhārata*', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol.48-49 (1968), pp.329-38.

3) See especially *ibid.*, 180.1-30, 194.21-24, 195.1-23, 196.1-23, 203.1-43, 204.1-16, 208.1-2, 211.1-48, 277.1-46, 316.1-59.

4) J.A.B. van Buitenen (trans. & ed.), *The Mahābhārata*, vol.3, p.182.

The setting of the text is as follows. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer Saṁjaya is sent to the Pāṇḍava court to attempt a reconciliation after the Pāṇḍavas' exile. Saṁjaya returns with Yudhiṣṭhira's reply. Appearing before Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Saṁjaya condemns his master for the discord within his family, then, pleading tiredness, he retires indicating he will deliver Yudhiṣṭhira's reply on the morrow. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is worried and sleepless, and sends for his half-brother Vidura and bids him share his wisdom until the morning. Vidura speaks at length on a range of subjects, and finally Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks if there is anything left he has not yet discussed. Vidura replies that the seer Sanatsujāta had proclaimed that there was no death. But, because he was born a *çūdra* he could not speak of this eternal wisdom. Presumably as a *çūdra* he was not entitled to speak of what was for the twice-born only. Vidura summons Sanatsujāta with his mind and the great sage instantly appears. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the sage then speak in private about death and non-death.

Sanatsujāta's brief exposition has some striking parallels with what is expounded at much greater length by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā*. According to Sanatsujāta, death, or more properly 'redeath' (*punararmṛtyu*), is due to 'folly' or 'distraction', or in other words to ignorance. Therefore, 'non-death' (*amṛtyu*) is the conquest of 'distraction' or ignorance, through knowledge of the soul (*ātman*). This means of overcoming death is then contrasted with the lot of those who seek after the fruits of their acts, which is the more usual approach of mortals.

Those who are attached to the fruit of their acts follow there after the resulting karma. They do not cross over death. He who, thinking, destroys the rising up (of karma), (though) not of hostile intellect through disrespect (for acting as such), he, indeed, is death (for) like death he consumes (them) as they arise. He who knows thus destroys his desires. The man who follows after his desires, is destroyed through (his) desires. Casting off (his) desires, a man can free himself from any passion. ... Desire kills him first and love and hatred take hold of him (and kill him) afterwards; these lead fools to their death; but the wise, through their steadiness, cross over death. ... (If) the soul is full of delusion from anger and greed, that is death itself within your own body. Knowing (that) death is born thus, he who stands in knowledge should have no fear of death here.¹

1) Karmodaye karmaphalānūrāgā-
 statrānu yānti na taranti mṛtyum// (8)
 Yo abhidhyāyannutpatiṣṇūnnihanyā-

Though Sanatsujāta delivers his discourse in that enigmatic Upaniṣadic style, what we have here is clearly the message that the *Bhagavadgītā* delivers on action at far greater length. Sanatsujāta, and the author of the *Bhagavadgītā*, are both concerned with what, for the orthodox tradition, was a grievous logical difficulty with the new theory of karma: if acts produce karmic fruit which require further rebirth, then why act at all? At the time many did follow this logic through by casting off all their social duties and obligations. The answer given in the *Sanatsujāta* (and in the *Gītā*) is that it is not acts that bind but the desire for the fruit of acts. Desire, in turn, spawns love and hatred, anger, greed, and delusion. It is this ignorant one, full of desire for the consequences of his actions, who is subjected to the repeated cycle of birth and death. But the wise one, who knows the nature of desire and karma, and who seeks the soul, passes beyond the cycle of birth and death. This interpretation of karma, of course, was of special relevance for Dhṛtarāṣṭra at this delicate stage of the *Mahābhārata*, for it could only but provide intellectual and philosophical justification for Dhṛtarāṣṭra's own dithering and indecision. By this interpretation it could be argued that the impending war was an unavoidable duty; and if this violent deed was done as a duty and not for any reward, it would have no unfavourable karmic consequences. The argument could only be a comfort for Dhṛtarāṣṭra, just as it would later be for Arjuna when he suffered from his own more dramatic loss of nerve.

We also learn something about the orthodox brāhmaṇic view of karma from the

 danādareṇāpratibudhyamānaḥ/
 Sa vai mṛtyurmṛtyurivātti bhūtvā
 evaṃ vidvāṇyo vinihanti kāmān// (9)
 Kāmānusārī puruṣaḥ kāmānanu vinaṣyati/
 Kāmānv Yudasya dhunute yatkiṃcitpuruṣo rajaḥ// (10)
 Abhidhyā vai prathamam hanti cainam
 kāmakrodhau gṛhya cainam tu paścāt/
 Ete bālānmṛtyave prāpayanti
 dhīrāstu dhairyeṇa taranti mṛtyum// (12)
 Krodhāllobhānmohamayāntarātmā
 sa vai mṛtyustvaccharīre ya eṣaḥ// (13)
 Evaṃ mṛtyum jāyamānam viditvā
 jñāne tiṣṭhanna bibhetīha mṛtyoḥ// (14) Udyogaparvan, 42.8-14.

story of Mataṅga who was raised as a brahmin, though illegitimately begotten on a brahmin woman by a *çūdra* father. On finding out the real nature of his birth, he undertook severe austerities (*tapas*) desirous of attaining from Indra the boon of the status of a brahmin. But Indra repeatedly indicated that such a boon was not possible for the status of a brahmin could only be achieved after successive transmigrations through the lower *varṇas* over many thousands of years; the length of time spent in each successive *varṇa* increasing manyfold. At long last one is born as a brahmin who knows the *Vedas*; and there again he has to wander for a very long time. But all the while he is assaulted by anger and joy, desire and hatred, pride and insult. If he conquers these, he attains a righteous end (*sadgatiṃ*); if not he falls again from his high status.¹

Elsewhere, references to karma in the *Mahābhārata* are quite sporadic, and normally incidental to some other moral or point that is being made. Thus the horrors of rebirth are briefly used to highlight the sinfulness of those who covet flesh to eat. These meat-eaters are said to fall into womb after womb and to be cooked in the hell called Kumbhīpāka. In this instance, particular emphasis is placed on the awfulness of the birth process, which occurs not once but repeatedly: 'While living in the uterus, (beings) are cooked by the fluids that are caustic, sour and pungent, by the terrible touch of urine, phlegm and excrement. Although unwilling, beings are torn asunder there again and again.'²

1) See Anuṣāsanaparvan, 29.1-16. The same idea that, before attaining salvation, one must work one's way up the social order to the dignity of a brahmin, appears elsewhere in the story of the discourse between Vyāsa Dvaipāyana (who conveniently knew the language of all animals) and a worm. Anuṣāsanaparvan, 118-120.

2) Garbhavāseṣu pacyante kṣārāmlakatuṅkai rasaiḥ/
Mūtraṣṭeṣmapuriṣāṇāṃ sparṣaiḥ ca bhr̥ṣadāruṇaiḥ//
Jātācāpyavaṣṭatratra bhidyamānāḥ punaḥ punaḥ/ *ibid.*, 117.28-29.

As well, the doctrine of karma makes a cursory appearance in at least a few of the many animal fables to be found in the *Mahābhārata*. For instance, in one such story we hear of King Paurika who ruled from the city of Paurikā. That lowest of men (*puruṣādhamah*) was cruel and took pleasure in injuring others. When this king's life had run its course he went to an undesirable end (*anīpsitām gatim*). Indeed, tainted by his previous deeds (*dūṣitaḥ pūrvakarmaṇā*) he was reborn as a jackal. Now, remembering his former birth he was filled with the greatest disgust (*nirvedaṃ paramaṃ*), and he abstained from eating meat, even if brought by others. Whatsmore, he practised non-injury towards all creatures, was truthful in speech, and practised very hard vows. Instead he only ate fallen fruit. And that jackal continued to live in his birth place, a burning ground. He desired to dwell nowhere else.¹

In other words, this fallen jackal accepted his lot as the appropriate deserts of his evil karma; but, presumably with an eye to his next birth, followed the habits of the virtuous, instead of those of other jackals. And it is the virtuous nature of this jackal that provides the setting for the real moral of the story - the dangers and intrigues of a king's court.²

Finally, it is also significant that the actual story line of the *Mahābhārata* is developed much more in terms of the giving of boons and the levelling of curses than in terms of karma and transmigration. As we have noted, the characters involved

1) *Çāntiparvan*, 112.1-7.

2) In brief, the remainder of the story is that the other jackals attempt to talk this jackal out of his pure ways. However, a tiger overhears his words of wisdom and invites him to be his minister. The jackal is reluctant because of the intrigues that occur in the courts of kings. He prefers his life of renunciation. In the event, the jackal's fears are well-founded for the tiger's old advisers do intrigue against and frame the jackal. The jackal is ordered slain by the tiger; but the tiger's mother talks some sense into her son's head. The tiger does make up to the jackal; but the jackal has had enough and now retires to the forest, performs the *prāya* vow and goes to heaven. For further examples, see the discourse between the vulture, jackal and bereaved family (*Çāntiparvan*, 149.31-37); and between the fallen jackal and the ape on the horrible sin of not giving a gift promised to a brahmin (*Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 9.8-12). Other incidental references to karma may be found at *Çāntiparvan*, 36.36 and *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 178.8-15.

in the central plot almost never contemplate their actions and fortunes in terms of past and future karma. Almost the only reference to karma in the development of the central story line itself occurs in the *Sauptikaparvan*, and it is indicative of the relative lack of importance of karma to much of the *Mahābhārata*. In this instance, Kṛpā, Kṛtavarman and Aṣvatthāman agonise over the implications for *dharma* of Aṣvatthāman's proposal to slaughter the victorious Pāṇḍava forces in their sleep. But in this charged discussion, there is only one reference to the consequences in terms of karma and transmigration; and it is a fairly carefree one at that, for after much debate Aṣvatthāman declares: 'Having slain the Pāṇcālās, those destroyers of my father, at night during their sleep, I will willingly be born as a worm or an insect.'¹

From what has been said so far, it is apparent that the *Mahābhārata* is well-acquainted with the doctrines of karma and transmigration, even if they are only intermittently and not particularly well-developed. There would seem to have been a substantial acceptance of the formal theory of these new doctrines, even if the intricacies did not trouble the Hindu sages in the same way as their Buddhist and Jainist counterparts.²

However, these doctrines did not begin to be accepted into the orthodox Hindu tradition until somewhere about the sixth or seventh centuries B.C. Nor did they

1) Pitṛphantṛnaḥam hatvā pāṇcālānniṣi sauptike/

Kāmaṁ kiṭaḥ patamgo vā janma prāpya bhavāmi vai// *Sauptikaparvan*, 5.25.

There are also quite frequent references - especially in the battle books - to an individual reaping the fruit of his deeds, but from the context it is clear that the deed and the fruit occur in this life only; there is no reference to transmigration. For instance, when Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks why his sons were always being slaughtered, and not the Pāṇḍavas, Saṁjaya replies that the Dhṛtarāṣṭras were now reaping the fruit of their own evil actions (*Bhīṣmaparvan*, 61.20). Though karmic in nature, such comments are no more than what one would expect in heroic literature, and are not necessarily connected with the peculiarly Indian theory of transmigration which came into prominence from the 6th-7th centuries B.C.

2) See P.S. Jaini, 'Karma and the Problem of Rebirth in Jainism', in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.217-38; and J.P. McDermott, 'Karma and Rebirth in Early Buddhism' in *ibid.*, pp.165-92.

emerge onto a scene that was entirely devoid of its own ideas on human action and afterlife. Thus, at the time much of the *Mahābhārata* was being compiled, we have the coming together and working out of at least two separate traditions. It would be quite unrealistic to expect that the new tradition would simply replace the old. A process of coalescence and adjustment was what inevitably occurred; but the results were far from even.

This process would seem to have been far more successful concerning views on afterlife. For the Vedic heaven and hell centred view of the final end of man could be readily adapted to the new idea that the individual was subject to repeated rebirth. Though in large parts of the *Mahābhārata*, the final ends remain heaven and hell, nonetheless the idea became widespread that after a stay in either one in accordance with the nature of one's accumulated acts, the individual simply returned to rebirth on earth. In this view, heaven and hell became temporary sojourns instead of the final ends; no doubt this was a plus for those in hell, and a minus for those in heaven.

However, it was much more difficult to reach an adjustment concerning the different views on human action. The difficulty was two-fold. Firstly, according to the new theory of karma, man alone was the only causal factor in explaining human action. However, the Vedic tradition was prepared to call upon various external 'forces' as well to explain human action; and these will be examined in succeeding chapters.

Secondly, reduced to its essence, the new theory of karma stated that through good deeds a man became good; and through evil deeds a man became evil. It established a strict causal connection between an act and its consequence for the doer. According to the logic of this connection each man should invariably reap what he himself has sown, and no man should reap what he has not sown. And this connection between the act and its consequence may stretch across repeated births. However, the Vedic tradition did not postulate or accept an invariable connection between an act and the subsequent consequence for the doer of that act.

Though some earlier Christian influenced writers have deprecated and even scorned Vedic notions of sin,¹ nevertheless the Vedic tradition did believe in a divine moral order accompanied by well-developed ideas concerning right and wrong, merit and evil, retribution and reward. To varying degrees individuals were held responsible for their actions.² For all intents and purposes it can be fairly said that the Vedic tradition exhibited its own theory of karma. As E. Washburn Hopkins writes: 'though the Karma doctrine is not yet formulated, its ethical principles are already in evidence. Thus suffering is recognised as the fruit of previous sin and when a good man dies he goes to the next world carrying his merit with him.'³ And, according to H. Lefever, for Vedic man it was a 'fact of experience, that every action of man, conscious or unconscious, produces its inevitable effect within the world order, *ṛta*.'⁴ However, in common with most religious traditions, the Vedic tradition did not accept that once evil had been committed its consequences must inexorably be suffered; and nor did it believe that an individual's abundance of merit could not be shared or used to help others. Some of these ideas must now be briefly considered.

In the earlier *Vedas* the principal method by which the wrongdoer could escape the consequences of his actions was to invoke a god to release him from the sin. The relationship between Vedic man and his god or gods was of the utmost importance. From the ethical point of view, the gods - especially Varuṇa - were looked upon as the guardians of the moral order of *ṛta*.⁵ Varuṇa, and to a lesser extent the Ādityas and other gods, punished sinners through 'fetters' or 'bonds' such

1) For instance, Keith, *op.cit.*, pp.244-6, 249, 311, 468-9, 584-6.

2) See Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.141-170; Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.1-44; H.G. Narahari, *Ātman in Pre-Upanisadic Vedic Literature*, pp.183-226.

3) Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.43-44.

4) H. Lefever, *The Vedic idea of sin*, p.26.

5) See Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.107-11, 143; Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.35-41; Keith, *op.cit.*, pp.84-85, 433, 448.

as disease, distress and misfortune, or some other form of suffering; and they rewarded the virtuous with long-life, prosperity and sons. In particular, nothing escaped Varuṇa. It was said that 'his two eyes embrace the three earths and three heavens', and 'Varuṇa sees all that is in the universe; numbered of him are the winkings of the people ... his spies go from the sky; thousand-eyed they look over the earth.' The wrong-doer could not escape Varuṇa 'even if he should fly to the ends of the heaven.'

However, this divine punishment was not exercised in a mechanical and automatic fashion. For the truly repentant sinner, who desired to mend his ways and follow the moral law, divine mercy and compassion were believed to be available.² Therefore, in the *Ṛg Veda*, and to a lesser degree in the other *Vedas*, we find frequent invocations to one or other god to release the wrongdoer from his sins.³ These invocations were no doubt accompanied by some form of sacrificial gift offering⁴ designed to avert the wrath of the god on the assumption that the food and drink so given would put the god in a suitably forgiving frame of mind.

However, in the later *Atharva Veda*, and especially in the literature of the *Brāhmaṇas*, the approach is not so much to entreat the gods for forgiveness, but to coerce or compel them through the power believed inherent in the sacrifice. In this later literature power lay not so much with the gods as with the brahmin filled with knowledge of the intricate sacrificial ritual. The sacrificial ritual became a means of virtually requiring the gods to remit sin, cure disease, give prosperity and so on.⁵ In some sacrifices, the gods seemingly lost all importance for the mere performance of the ritual could automatically purify the wrongdoer. At this level, the sacrifice could provide an almost mechanical cure for sin.⁶

1) Cited in Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.22-23.

2) *Ibid.*, p.34.

3) See *ibid.*, pp.12, 17-19, 30, 33-34; Keith, *op.cit.*, pp.215-16, 248; Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.171-82.

4) Keith, *op.cit.*, p.264. 5) Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.45, 53-54.

6) *Ibid.*, pp.53-4; and Keith, *op.cit.*, pp.264-5.

Nevertheless, the gods were not entirely redundant, and efforts to entreat them are still to be found in the later literature.¹ The gods may also retain some importance in another set of Vedic practices connected with the removal of sin - expiations and mortifications. Though these practices are only recorded towards the very end of the Vedic period² their antiquity certainly goes back to the Indo-Iranian period, if not before.³ Many of these expiatory rites were extremely difficult and painful, to say the least. For instance, the unfaithful husband was required to wear an asses skin and to go about begging, proclaiming that he had sinned against his wife. A murderer, too, was required to wear the skin of an ass or a dog, to carry the skull of the dead man from which he had to drink, and to survive on alms, declaring to all those from whom he begged the crime he had committed.⁴ The rationale behind these severe expiations was obviously varied. But in part they must have been intended to propitiate the gods by making reparation for the violation of the moral order. The consequences of the wrong would also be lessened by being openly confessed. At a more practical level, it warned others of the offender's wickedness; and given the belief that sin could be physically transferred, this may have been of importance.⁵ In these examples, then, a wrongdoer could obviate the consequences of sin by the performance of some mortification or self-punishment, often of a very severe kind. However, from the time of the *R̥g Veda* we also find the practice of mortifications and austerities as a means of generating *tapas*. Even in the early Vedas this seminal word assumed a divergent range of meanings; but central to all meanings was the original root idea of 'heat' or 'warmth'.⁶ This generated 'heat' was considered to have a wide variety of

1) Hopkins, Ethics of India, pp.45-6.

2) Keith, op.cit., p.266.

3) Ibid., p.266; and M. Stutley, Ancient Indian magic and folklore: an introduction, p.104.

4) Keith, op.cit., p.266.

5) Ibid., p.266; and Stutley, op.cit., pp.104-5.

6) See W.O. Kaelber, 'Tapas, Birth, and Spiritual Rebirth in the Veda', History of Religions, vol.15 (1976), pp.343-4; and C. Blair, Heat in the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda, pp.1-9.

applications - both creative and destructive. Originally the destructive dimension of this 'heat' was employed against such enemies of the Vedic sacrifice as *rākṣasas* but as concern with purity grew, it came to be increasingly used against the more important internal enemy of impurity. Hence *tapas* or 'heat' became the primary means of effecting the purification of the components of the sacrifice, including the sacrificer himself. It was deemed to destroy the sin of the sacrificer,¹ which would otherwise negate the success of the rite.

So far, in the Vedic view, sin has been considered primarily as a moral quality, which could be removed by invocation of the gods, sacrifice or some expiation. However, another (and probably older) conception of sin is to be found in the *Ṛg Veda*, and if anything it became the prevailing view in the *Atharva Veda* and the *Brāhmaṇas*. This is the notion that sin is some sort of external substance, a pollution, defilement, stain or disease. Appropriately enough, the solution was to wash it off with water, heal it with herbs, purify it with fire or smoke, or to wipe it away with unguents and ointments.² It should be apparent that by this view of sin, notions of inner repentance followed by divine forgiveness were irrelevant.

The more popular and magical view of sin as an external physical substance must help account for one of the most noteworthy and important features of the Vedic view; the idea that sin (and merit) could be readily transferred from man to man, father to son, god to man, sacrificer to priest, and so on, without any apparent misdeed on the part of the recipient.³ Indeed, it is a common Vedic prayer that one should not suffer from the sins of another,⁴ though logically there should have been no need to worry. As A.B. Keith puts it: 'even as man may be affected by sin without action of his own, so he can transfer sin or even a good deed to others, and so get

1) Kaelber, *op.cit.*, pp.380-1.

2) Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.14-15, 24, 46-7; Keith, *op.cit.*, pp.245-6; Miller, *op.cit.*, pp.149-50.

3) Keith, *op.cit.*, p.245, Stutley, *op.cit.*, pp.107-10, and J.C. Heesterman, 'Vrātya and Sacrifice', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol.1 (1962), pp.11-29.

4) Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, p.19.

rid not merely of sins which have been passed on to him, but also of sins which he himself has committed."

It is important to note that transference of merit and sin was considered especially possible within the family network, both past and present.² A not uncommon prayer addressed by the Vedic bard to the gods was to 'Release us from the sins of my fathers and what sins we ourselves have committed.'³ This idea was part of a wider Vedic recognition that the individual in the present was part of a closely bound lineage of ancestors and descendants in which the welfare of one depended on the welfare of all. The Vedic belief in interdependence can be seen particularly clearly in the most important of the orthodox domestic rituals, the offerings to the dead performed in the *çrāddha* and the *sapīṇḍikarāṇa* rites.

In the Vedic period there is little evidence that - so long as due offerings were made to them - the spirits of the dead as such were feared. The Vedic Indian more normally contemplated his ancestors with esteem and affection, and held to the belief that if he cared for his ancestors, his ancestors would care for him. Through the *çrāddha* ceremony he provided his ancestors to the seventh degree with a steady stream of nourishment and sustenance for their journey in the afterlife. Through performance of the *sapīṇḍikarāṇa* rite he advanced the vulnerable and disembodied spirit of his just departed ancestor onto a secure abode in the first of the worlds of the ancestors or *pitr̥s*, and in turn earlier ancestors were advanced to yet higher worlds. Reciprocally, it was believed that the ancestors would utilise their accumulated merit to provide for their descendants such rewards as health and long life, success and prosperity. And in particular, they would send progeny or sons to their descendants, for upon the successive generations of sons fell the duty of performing the *çrāddha* and *sapīṇḍikarāṇa* rites that ensured the continued nourishment and spiritual advancement of the ancestors.⁴ This interdependence of

1) Keith, *op.cit.*, p.245. 2) *Ibid.*, p.245. 3) Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, pp.19, 26-7.

4) See Keith, *op.cit.*, pp.425-29; and D.M. Knipe, 'Sapīṇḍikarāṇa: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven, in F. Reynolds and F.H. Waugh (eds.), *Religious Encounters with Death. Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions*, pp.111-122.

the living and the dead is well-expressed by the descendant as he offers food and water to his ancestors: 'This life-strength is for you, this *svadhā* is for you. Eat and drink. Do not allow us to perish.'¹ Clearly, given the symbiotic relationship in which sustenance and merit flowed freely backwards and forwards, belief in the similar transferability of sin made perfect sense.

Now, in the Epics (and *Purāṇas*) the Vedic interest in the avoidance of the consequences of sin or the transfer of sin is continued, and if anything even more developed. The *Mahābhārata* itself provides such a wide plethora of means for obviating or transferring sin that the Epic sinner should never have been truly troubled by the prospect of hell.² In the fully developed Hindu tradition probably the most important method for the removal of sin was through the force of *bhakti*; through devotion and invocation a personal god could be induced to set aside unfortunate karmic consequences.³ Outside of the *Bhagavadgītā*, *bhakti* is of very varying importance in the *Mahābhārata*; though it still remains an effective force for the removal of sin. For instance, the sage Vālmīki relates how he had once been condemned by certain seers as guilty of brāhmaṇicide, but he was purified of his sins after he had sought the protection of Īcāna or Ṣiva.⁴ Likewise Rāma Jāmadagnya, when guilty of brāhmaṇicide, had also been purified of his sins by praising Ṣiva with his many names. To his faithful devotees, Ṣiva is said to be the destroyer or remover of all evil (*sarvapāpaharo*).⁵ Elsewhere Ṣiva is described as purifying (*pavitram*);⁶ and he saves (*mocayati*) even those possessed by every sin (*sarvapāpasamanvitān*) if they come to him for protection (*ṣaraṇāgatān*), and he is

1) Kāṭhakaghyasūtra, 50.11, cited in Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.122. Emphasis added.

2) This may partly explain why in the *Mahābhārata* while the tortures of hell are mentioned, the text does not really dwell on let alone revel in the fearsome and intricate details. Yudhiṣṭhira's description of hell is the most detailed, and even that ultimately proves to be a divine illusion.

3) See W.D. O'Flaherty, 'Karma in the Vedas and Purāṇas' in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.27-28.

4) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 18.8.

5) Āraṇyakaparvan, 40.1

6) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 17.130.

well-pleased (*suprītaḥ*) with them.¹

Viṣṇu-Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa also shares the same ability to free the wrongdoer of sin. Thus in one praise of Kṛṣṇa it is said that there could be found no sin (*na teṣāṃ vidyate pāpaṃ*) nor defeat in battle for those with whom he was satisfied (*tvam yeṣāṃ tuṣṭo asi*).² Elsewhere Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that recitation of the *Viṣṇusahasranāmastotra* removes fear and sin (*pāpabhayāpaham*).³ At the conclusion of the *stotra*, Bhīṣma added that a mortal who took refuge in Vāsudeva (*vāsudevācraḥ*) and who became devoted to Vāsudeva (*vāsudevaparāyaṇaḥ*), would go to eternal *Brahman*, his character purified of all sins (*sarvāpāpaviṣuddhātmā*).⁴ However, it is not entirely clear from the context whether mere devotion is sufficient to invite the intervention of the god, or whether a true reformation of the sinner's character is also necessary.

Another Vedic solution for sin that is carried over into the *Mahābhārata* is that of sacrifice; and it is the solution which is commended to Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas. After the end of the great battle Yudhiṣṭhira is filled with grief at the enormity of what had happened. Having slain their kith and kin, they had committed evil without end (*pāpamanantakaṃ*) and they would have to fall into hell with their heads downwards. Yudhiṣṭhira's solution was that they should relinquish their bodies by the performance of severe austerities (*ṣarīrāṇi vimokṣyāmastapasogreṇa*).⁵ However, besides his own brothers, various great seers appear to advise Yudhiṣṭhira that this is not the right solution. The ṛṣi Vyāsa advises Yudhiṣṭhira to rule as a king should and not to pursue an early death through renunciation. Expiations (*prāyaścittāni*), he added, had been laid down (*vihitāni*) for all acts; but Yudhiṣṭhira could only perform them if he remained alive. It was only if he did not perform expiations that he would suffer the torments of hell after death.⁶

1) Droṇaparvan, 173.71.

3) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 135.12.

5) Āntiparvan, 33.12.

2) *Ibid.*, 124.8.

4) *Ibid.*, 135.130.

6) Āntiparvan, 32.23-24.

By way of illustration, Vyāsa discusses the wide range of sins - from having rotten nails and black teeth to brāhmaṇicide - for which expiations existed.¹ There were, though, some limits. Vyāsa qualifies that though expiations were laid down, there was an exception in cases of great sin (*mahāpātakavarjaṃ*);² and a man was only purified of evil if he did not commit that evil again.³ Nor was there expiation for one who deliberately undertook evil acts, and continued to do them, feeling no shame (*nirapatrapaḥ*).⁴

In the case of King Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers, Vyāsa advises, the *āṣvamedha* or Horse-Sacrifice was the appropriate expiation.⁵ Though still hankering after the way of renunciation, Yudhiṣṭhira does perform the grand *āṣvamedha*, and he and his brothers are freed of their sins. At the critical stage of the sacrifice, the officiating brahmins took up the marrow of the sacrificial horse and cooked it in accordance with the *ṣāstras*. Then Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers smelt the odour from the smoke of the marrow (*vapādhūmagandham*) that had the capacity of removing all sins (*sarvapāpmāpahaṃ*).⁶

However, by the time of the *Mahābhārata*, faith in the importance of the really grand Vedic *ṣrauta* sacrifices was in serious decline.⁷ Nevertheless, there were numerous lesser sacrifices, and atoning for the consequences of evil through some rite or other may have been an important function of priests (be they great *ṛsis* or humble *purohitas*). For instance, when Bhīma advises Yudhiṣṭhira to give up their exile, leave the forest and proceed to the immediate slaughter of the Dhārtarāṣṭras, he is not in the least worried about the consequences of breaking their vow and the *dharma*; for it could be duly atoned: 'Dear (Brother), enemy-tamer, having driven away

1) *Ibid.*, 35.3-14.

2) *Ibid.*, 36.39.

3) *Ibid.*, 36.1.

4) *Ibid.*, 34.23-24.

5) *Ibid.*, 34.26; *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, 70.16, 90.15.

6) *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, 91.3-4. At *Çāntiparvan*, 36.6 the Horse-Sacrifice is said to purify even the murder of a brahmin. Also cf. *Droṇaparvan*, 125.15, *Çāntiparvan*, 79.30, *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 12.4, 83.33.

7) See below pp.298-304.

the evil done with sacrificial rites of various sorts, we shall go to the highest heaven, O great king!"

The same idea occurs when King Janamejaya is cursed by Saramā - the divine bitch of the gods - with an unseen danger (*adr̥ṣṭam ... bhayam*) after the king's brothers had beaten her son without cause. Janamejaya then searched for a priest (*purohitam*) who could appease the evil he had done (*me pāpakṛtyām śamayediti*), even though the evil had been perpetrated by his brothers. Eventually the king came to the *āśrams* of the great ṛṣi Śrutaśravas and chose the ṛṣi's son Somaśravas to be his priest. To this the ṛṣi agreed and commended his son as one competent to appease all evil deeds, except deeds against the Great God (*mahādeva*).² In these cases, sacrificial rites seem to be no more than a mechanical panacea for the fact of sin.

Another Vedic panacea for sin that continued a vigorous life in the Epic is that of atonement or reparation for wrong-doing through self-suffering or mortification. However, expiation continued to be no easy way out, for if anything many of the vows and austerities laid down must have been greater punishment than any possible karmic consequences. For instance, Vyāsa explains to Yudhiṣṭhira the expiation for what to a brahmin was the gravest of all sins - the murder of a brahmin. A man, he indicates, may be freed of brahmin murder after a full 12 years if he eats only once a day, wanders around begging, performs all acts himself, carries a skull in his hand and a staff with a skull at the top, becomes a brahmin, never complains, sleeps on the ground and announces his sinful deed to the world. Alternatively, he may be freed after six years if he eats only once a month; or after a very short time if he ceases eating altogether. Or again, if he is slain in battle for the sake of a brahmin he is freed of his sin.³

For the general accumulated sins of life one might be freed by falling from the

1) Yajñaiçca vividhaistāta kṛtaṃ pāpamarīḍama/
Avadhūya mahārāja gacchema svargamuttamam// Āraṇyakaparvan 49.18. Also
Çāntiparvan, 184.2.
2) Ādiparvan, 3.1-15. 3) Çāntiparvan, 36.2-7; also 159.49.

precipice of Mount Meru, by entering a blazing fire, or by setting out on the great departure (*mahāprasthānamātiṣṭhan*) after renouncing the world.¹ Or one could be purified by giving up life for the sake of a brahmin.² A doer of evil (*duṣkṛtaḥ*) could also be purified of sins if slain by weapons in battle (*çāstrahatā raṇe*).³ Less traumatically, one who abstained from a single meal per day throughout the month of *mārgaṣīrṣa*, and who fed some brahmins with devotion was freed of all diseases and sins (*mucyedvyādhikilbiṣaiḥ*).⁴ And one who consumed with restraint food obtained from twice-born, who were conversant with the rites, destroyed his sins (*pāpmā naçyati*).⁵ And when Vāsudeva asked the Goddess Earth how a householder (*grhī*) dispelled evil deeds (*kenasvitkarmanā pāpaṃ vyapohati*) the Goddess replied that honouring-and-serving brahmins was the highest form of purification.⁶ Elsewhere it is explained that obedience to one's *guru* destroyed all sins (*kalmaṣaṃ guruṣuṣṛūṣā hanti*).⁷

For less heinous sins the expiations ordained were of a more modest nature. One who had been disobedient or lied to his *guru* was freed of this sin by performing an action pleasing to his teacher.⁸ Having stolen the property of another, one should return wealth of the same value (*tasmai dadyātsamaṃ vasu*).⁹ Or, having killed a bird or an animal or cut down a living tree, a person was freed of his evil by fasting for three nights and announcing his sin publicly.¹⁰

The almost unnatural severity of some of the expiations does at least indicate something about the concerns and priorities of the orthodox brahmin redactors. Generally crimes involving sex and other bodily indulgences, and crimes against brahmins, entail the most dire expiations. Thus one who has broken a vow of chastity should undertake the vow for brahmin-murder, and wear the skin of an ass for six months; then he is freed of his sin.¹¹ The expiation ordained for illicit

1) *Ibid.*, 36.14.

3) *Ibid.*, 79.30.

5) *Çāntiparvan*, 210.18.

7) *Ibid.*, 68.18.

9) *Ibid.*, 36.23.

11) *Ibid.*, 36.21.

2) *Ibid.*, 159.48.

4) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 109.17.

6) *Ibid.*, 34.20-21.

8) *Çāntiparvan*, 36.20.

10) *Ibid.*, 36.30.

intercourse consisted in wandering for six months in wet clothes and sleeping on ashes.¹ But that wicked (*durātmā*) and evil-minded (*pāpacetanah*) one who violated his guru's bed was purified by his death, brought about by embracing a burning hot *sūrmī* (*sūrmīm jvalantīmāṅgliṣya*), which was a hollow metal statue of the female form.² Or, having emasculated himself, he should take his penis and testicles in his own hands (*çiṅnavrṣaṇāvādāyāñjalīnā svayam*) and proceed towards the south-west until he fell down (*nīpatetsa*) - and presumably fell down dead.³ A drinker of spirituous liquor was freed of that evil and purified by his death brought about by drinking hot spirituous liquor (*vāruṇīmuṣṇām pītva*) which burnt up his body (*kāye nirdagdhe*).⁴ One guilty of the destruction of a foetus (*bhrūṇahā*) was purified if struck down by weapons (*çastrapātitaḥ*) in the middle of battle; or by sacrificing himself on a flaming fire (*ātmānaṃ juhuyādvahnau samiddhe*).⁵ Bhīṣma concluded that, short of death, there was no expiation for the drinking of spirituous liquor, the killing of a brahmin, the violation of a preceptor's bed, the stealing of gold, and thieving from a brahmin.⁶

However, expiations were at least an easier matter for women and brahmins. The sins of women were cleansed by their menstrual course (*rajasā tā viçudhyante*).⁷ A brahmin could be cleansed of all sin by reciting the *gayatrī* hymn, restricting his diet, casting off envy, anger and hate, being indifferent to praise and blame, observing the vow of silence, living and sleeping under the sky, and performing his sacred ablutions with his clothes on.⁸

These expiations, however, are ordained as a 'cure' after the event. Now, in the Epics the idea that self-mortifications should be voluntarily performed as a self-

1) *Ibid.*, 36.31.

3) *Ibid.*, 159.47; cf. 36.17.

5) *Ibid.*, 159.44.

6) *Ibid.*, 159.32-36. Though elsewhere it is said that expiation (*niṣkṛtīr*) was laid down for one who slew a brahmin, drank spirituous liquor, who stole, and who broke a vow (*bhagnavrate*); but there was no expiation for an ungrateful person (*kṛtaghne*). *Ibid.*, 166.24; cf. 155.6, and 263.11.

7) *Ibid.*, 36.27.

2) *Ibid.*, 159.46.

4) *Ibid.*, 159.45.

8) *Ibid.*, 36.33-34.

imposed hardship to generate *tapas* or 'heat' is even more important than in the *Vedas*. By the time of the Epics, *tapas* is one of the more important concepts in the evolving Hindu tradition. As we shall see, its creative and destructive dimensions are much developed in the *Mahābhārata*; and one aspect of this is its perceived ability to destroy sin. This is especially the case for those practitioners of *tapas*, the great *rṣis*. Thus Bhagīratha, who propitiated Śiva to bring down the Gaṅgā river to earth, is described as having his sins burnt off through *tapas* (*tapasā dagdhakilbiṣaḥ*).¹ Exactly the same wording is used with reference to the great royal *rṣi* Ārṣṭiṣena.²

Even the most impure of sins can be cured through *tapas*. In one story it is related that at the end of the *Tretā Yuga* a terrible drought took place extending for twelve years. All social order broke down and the death and starvation was great. In this situation of extreme distress wandered the mighty *rṣi* Viṣvāmitra, stricken with hunger. One night Viṣvāmitra came to the hut of a *caṇḍāla*, and there he saw the rear end of a dog (*çvajāghaniṁ*) spread out on the floor. Intent on saving his life, Viṣvāmitra now decided to steal from the most degraded of people the impurest part of the most impure of animals. However, caught in the act, the *caṇḍāla* pointed out the terrible nature of the sin involved. Viṣvāmitra responded that life was better than death (*jivitaṁ maraṇācchreya*), and that by living he could dispel these disagreeable evils by austerities and knowledge (*praṇotsyāmyaṣubhāni ca tapobhirvidyayā caiva*) and go on to attain virtue (*dharmam*).³ And it was as Viṣvāmitra said. He subsequently burnt off all his sins by means of *tapas* (*tapasā dagdhakilbiṣaḥ*).⁴

This cure for sin was also open to lesser mortals. In the story of the pigeon and the hunter to be found in the *Çāntiparvan*, the male pigeon (with his wife's urging) fulfills the duty of hospitality towards all guests to its ultimate extreme;

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 107.4.

3) Çāntiparvan, 139.61-63.

2) *Ibid.*, 156.1.

4) *Ibid.*, 139.91.

he immolates himself to provide a warm meal for the hungry, cold and exhausted hunter, even though the latter had caught and caged the pigeon's wife. Through this deed, the hunter realised his wickedness. Now, seeing that the two pigeons had gone to heaven, the hunter too became intent on going to that high end through austerities (*tapasā gaccheyam paramāṃ gatim*). In time, the hunter saw a vast spreading forest fire. Determined to renounce his body, the hunter ran into the fire; and burnt by that fire (*agninā dagdho*), his sins were destroyed (*naṣṭakilbiṣaḥ*).¹ Elsewhere, though, it is said that only sins (*pāpam*) that are committed in ignorance (*ajñānād*) may be dispelled through tapas (*tapasaivābhinirṇudet*).²

The rather awkward (for the orthodox) fact of Draupadī having five husbands is also explained by the use of *tapas* to overcome karmic consequences. Once, the *Ādiparvan* relates, there was a young and incomparably beautiful girl, the daughter of a great-souled *ṛṣi*, who was possessed of all virtues. But because of previous acts which she had done (*karmabhiḥ svakṛtaiḥ*) she became ill-fated (*durbhagā*) and could not find a husband. Therefore, she began awesome austerities or *tapas* for the sake of obtaining a husband (*tapastaptum athārebhe patyartham*); and eventually satisfied (*toṣayāmāsa*) *Ṣiva* himself. *Ṣiva* offered her the boon of choosing a husband and five times she said she wanted a husband with all the virtues. *Ṣiva* took her at her word and bestowed on the protesting girl five husbands in her next birth. The maid was reborn as Draupadī, the wife of the Pāṇḍavas.³ In this case, the maids previous bad karma is overcome by her practise of *tapas*, which in turn elicits the appropriate boon from the god.

Another more straightforward and certainly less exacting solution offered by the *Mahābhārata* for the consequences of sin was simple repentance. For instance, the virtuous and wise hunter, after his long discourse on karma, advises the not so wise brahmin: 'He who feels remorse because of an unlawful act, is freed from evil; (and)'

1) *Ibid.*, 145.1-12. Also 174.17-18.

2) *Ibid.*, 280.6.

3) *Ādiparvan*, 157.6-14.

he is freed from repeating it by saying: "This I will not do again".¹ However, repentance should also be accompanied by a true change in behaviour. He should thereafter seek to do what is right for it is only the man who abides by virtue who is freed from all evil.²

Elsewhere it is stated that the consequences of evil can be overcome by taking up the practice of one's ordained duty or *dharma*, and by reforming one's ways. Yudhiṣṭhira, aggrieved at the terrible acts they were having to commit in the battle, consoled himself with the thought: 'O Dhanamjaya, the evil one has done can be struck down by virtue. And, according to sacred scripture, he who has adopted renunciation is not able to do the evil again.'³ Similarly, after Brhaspati's long exposition of the doctrine of karma, Yudhiṣṭhira significantly asks how one who had committed sinful acts (*kṛtvā karmāṇi pāpāni*) could still go to an auspicious end (*yānti śubhāṃ gatim*). Brhaspati replies that one who had committed unlawful acts through folly (*mohādadharmam ... kṛtvā*), but then feels remorse or repents (*punaḥ samanutapate*) and sets his mind to meditation (*manasamādhisamyukto*) has not to experience his wrongdoings (*na sa seveta duṣkṛtam*). The more a man fully confesses his unlawful act (*samyagadharmamanubhāṣate*) the more he is freed from his sin.⁴ Also the great ṛṣi Indrota explains to King Janamejaya, who was guilty of unintentional brāhmaṇicide, that one could be freed of the evil of an unlawful act by repenting or feeling remorse (*tapyamānaḥ*). If committed twice, one could be freed by vowing not to repeat the act (*naitatkāryam punariti*); and if committed thrice one could be freed by acting virtuously thereafter (*carīṣye dharmameveti*).⁵ This was especially the case where the sin was unintentional. Thus Indrota relates to Janamejaya that in days of old the gods and *asuras* approached Brhaspati and asked

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- 1) Vikarmaṇā tapyamānaḥ pāpādviparimucyate/
Naitatkuryām punariti dvitīyātparimucyate// Āraṇyakaparvan, 198.48.
2) Evaṃ kalyāṇamātiṣṭhansarvapāpāḥ pramucyate// *ibid.*, 198.53.
3) Dhanamjaya kṛtaṃ pāpaṃ kalyāṇenopahanyate/
Tyāgavāṇṇca punaḥ pāpaṃ nālaṃ kartumiti śrutih// Śāntiparvan, 7.34.
4) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 113.1-4. 5) Śāntiparvan, 148.22.

how a virtuous person could dispel his sins (*katham pāpaṃ nudate puṇyaçīlaḥ*). Brhaspati explained that 'Having unintentionally committed evil previously, he who intentionally performs virtuous (acts), that virtuous (person) dispells that evil. ... As the sun, rising again, removes all darkness, so by acting virtuously does one remove all evil.'¹ As well, one who cultivated the virtues pertaining to *mokṣa* - renouncing desire, anger, greed, fear, and pursuing meditation, study, giving, truth, rectitude, forbearance, purity, and restraint - got rid of his sins (*pāpmānam-apahanti*), amongst other things.² The virtuous *asura* Bali also explains to Indra that by 'attaining understanding' (*buddhilābhe*) a person dispells all his sins (*sarvaṃ nudati kilbiṣaṃ*).³

There are three further methods for the dispelling of evil consequences to which the *Mahābhārata* gives much attention, though they play little or no real part in the Vedic approach to sin: listening to meritorious teachings, gifts, and pilgrimage to sacred places. These must now be examined.

The *Mahābhārata* repeatedly reiterates that by listening to meritorious teachings, the individual might acquire a wide variety of rewards, one of which was freedom from evils committed. Of these meritorious teachings, appropriately enough none was more effective than the *Mahābhārata* itself. In the opening chapter of the text, Ugraçravas proudly proclaims:

Here (in the *Mahābhārata*) Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana has imparted a sacred *upaniṣad*. They who learn even a quarter verse of this sacred study of the Bhāratas and have faith, will be purified of all sins completely. ... A wise man, who has this *veda* of Kṛṣṇa proclaimed, attains profit. Without a doubt, he will be rid of even the evil act of the killing of an embryo.⁴

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- 1) Kṛtvā pāpaṃ pūrvamabuddhipūrvam
 puṇyāni yaḥ kurute buddhipūrvam/
 Sa tatpāpaṃ nudate puṇyaçīlo ... (30)
 Yathādityaḥ punarudyānstaṃ sarvaṃ vyapohati/
 Kalyāṇamācarannevaṃ sarvaṃ pāpaṃ vyapohati// (33) *ibid.*, 148.30 & 33; cf.
 Çāntiparvan, 124.19-23, 132.11-15, and Anuçāsanaparvan, 74.36.
 2) Çāntiparvan, 266.14-16. 3) *ibid.*, 217.11.
 4) Atropaniṣadaṃ puṇyāṃ kṛṣṇadvaipāyano abravīt/
 Bhāratādhyayanāt puṇyādapi pādamadhīyataḥ/
 Çraddadhānasya pūyante sarvapāpānyaçeṣataḥ// (191)
 Kārṣṇaṃ vedamimaṃ vidvāṇīçrāvayitvārthamaçnute/
 Bhrūṇahatyākṛtaṃ cāpi pāpaṃ jahyāṇa saṃçayaḥ// (205) *Ādiparvan*, 1.191, 205.

Even just listening to a part of the *Mahābhārata* is sufficient to achieve the same end. At the conclusion of the Book of Origins in the *Ādiparvan*, Vaiṣampāyana announces: 'A man, having heard this in its entirety, is purified from evil; and he attains to omniscience, and gains the foremost way (after death).'¹

At first, listening to meritorious teachings might seem an all too easy way of escaping the consequences of sin; but the seeming rationale is that the teachings are meritorious, and should lead to a corresponding change in behaviour patterns. This the *Mahābhārata* itself makes apparent:

He who knows (the *Mahābhārata*) and causes (others) to listen to it, and those folk who listen to it, having gone to the realm of Brahmā, they attain equality with the gods. For it is equal to the *Vedas*, and moreover the supreme means of purification. And this ancient legend, which is praised by the ṛṣis, is the most excellent of those worth hearing. In it Profit, and Law (*dharma*) are taught in their entirety. And in this very holy story, (there is found) the most perfect belief. ... Even a very dreadful man, having heard this story, will undoubtedly escape even the evil act of killing an embryo.²

The *Mahābhārata* also gives considerable attention to the many and varied rewards to be attained by the giving of gifts, with one of the principal rewards being the cleansing of sin. The most extensive teaching on the rewards of making gifts is to be found in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*. Again, the still grieving Yudhiṣṭhira is the listener, and Bhīṣma the teacher who provides a discourse of almost wearisome length. Bhīṣma considers the virtues of such important gifts as cows, gold, land, food, and even sesame seeds (*tila*), all of which are variously considered to be the highest or foremost gift possible.³ As well, the rewards of other gifts are considered, such as: planting trees and gardens and the digging of water

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- 1) Yaṃ ṣrutvā puruṣaḥ samyakpūto bhavati pāpmanah/
Sarvajñatām ca labhate gatimagryām ca vindati// *ibid.*, 60.69; also *ibid.*, 90.96,
Anuśāsanaparvan, 2.94, 17.15, *Āgramavāsikaparvan*, 43.15.
 - 2) Ya idam ṣrāvayedvidvānyaçcedam ṣṇuyānnarah/
Te brahmanah sthānametya prāpnuyurdevatulyatām//
Idam hi vedaiḥ samitam pavitramapi cottamam/
Ṣrāvyaṇāmuttamam cedam purāṇamṛṣisamstutam//
Asminnarthaḥ ca dharmāḥ ca nikhilenopadiṣyate/
Itihāse mahāpunye buddhiḥ ca parinaisṭhikī//
Bhṛūṇahatyākṛtaṃ cāpi pāpaṃ jahyādasamçayam/
Itihāsamimam ṣrutvā puruṣo api sudārunah// *Ādiparvan*, 56.14-16 & 18.
 - 3) See, respectively, *Anuśāsanaparvan*, 80.2, 73.9, 61.1, 63.6, 65.10.

tanks for public benefit;¹ the giving of daughters;² the giving of flowers, fruits and trees;³ gifts of personal adornments such as garlands, perfumes, and ointments;⁴ and gifts of clarified butter,⁵ and umbrellas.⁶ The possible rewards specified are of the most varied sort and range all the way from the seemingly trivial⁷ to the highest of worldly attainments - the enjoyment of heaven, the avoidance of hell,⁸ and rescue from the consequences of one's own misdeeds.

Gifts of cows are an especially efficacious method for dispelling the consequences of accumulated sins.⁹ Such gifts are never too late. According to Bhīṣma, a man, fettered by his own deeds (*svakarmabhir ... saṃnibaddham*), who is falling into the horrible darkness of hell (*tīvrāndhakāre narake patantam*) is rescued in the hereafter by a gift of cows (*dānam gavāṃ tārāyate paratra*).¹⁰ Gifts of cows are highly commended, it would seem, because of the intrinsic purifying effects of the cow and all its products. Presumably the giver is purified by the gift, and the recipient may attain purification through the cow. For instance, the text explains that 'He (who) eats porridge, for a month, (made) with barley extracted from cow (dung) is purified of all sin, equal even to brāhmaṇicide.'¹¹ It is even related that the gods practised this purification (*çaucamidaṃ kṛtam*) after their defeat by the demons, and thereby regained their position as gods (*devatvamapi ca prāptāḥ*).¹²

Similarly, gifts of gold are purifying (*pavitrāṇi*) and rescue even the wicked (*tārāyantiyapi duṣkṛtam*).¹³ Even more, the seer Vasiṣṭha relates that gifts of gold at midday destroy future sins (*hanti pāpamanāgatam*).¹⁴ And land, when given

1) *Ibid.*, 64.4-5, 99.1. 2) *Ibid.*, 57.25 & 32. 3) *Ibid.*, 57.36.

4) *Ibid.*, 57.38. 5) *Ibid.*, 64.9. 6) *Ibid.*, 64.17-18.

7) For instance, he who gives an umbrella in the rainy season has never to suffer from heart-burn (*manodāhaḥ*). *Ibid.*, 64.18.

8) e.g. *Ibid.*, 57.27-31.

9) Çāntiparvan, 36.8-12, Anuṣāsanaparvan, 70.49-50, 76.4.

10) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 57.31.

11) Nīrhṛtaiṣa yavairgobhirmāsaṃ prasṛtayāvakaḥ/

Brahmahatyāsamam pāpam sarvametena çudhyati// Anuṣāsanaparvan, 80.37.

12) *Ibid.*, 80.38. 13) *Ibid.*, 58.5-6; also 61.52, 73.9. 14) *Ibid.*, 83.61.

away, purifies the giver (*punāti dattā prthivī dātāram*); and even a man guilty of brāhmaṇicide and falsehood (*anṛtam*) is purified (*saiva pāpaṃ pāvayati*) and freed of his evil (*saiva pāpātpramocayet*) by a gift of earth.¹ Likewise, one who gives gifts of food is purified of every evil act.² One who has done even a wicked act (*kṛtvāpi pāpakam karma*) is not bound by that evil (*na sa pāpena yujyate*) if he gives food to a suppliant, especially a brahmin.³

The giver of water, too, obtains all his desires, everlasting fame, and is freed of his sins.⁴ And a well (*kūpaḥ*), from which water always comes forth, is said to take off half the evil (*ardham pāpasya harati*) of the man who excavated it.⁵ Gifts of sesame seeds confer prosperity, personal beauty, and destroy sins.

And after explaining the intricacies of karma to Yudhiṣṭhira, Brhaspati adds that by making gifts a wrongdoer may become endowed with virtue (*dharmaṇa yujyate*); and of all gifts, the gift of food was the best (*creṣṭham*).⁶ In particular, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, and *çūdras* who made gifts of food and land to brahmins would be freed of all sins.⁷

At first sight the giving of gifts to overcome sin (or to attain other rewards) must seem the easiest religious short-cut of all; and for the most part the emphasis in the text is undeniably on the gift and the reward. Occasionally, though, the text does at least suggest that it is not the gift but the attitude of the giver and the circumstances of the giving that really matter. For instance, Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira that the gift is not as important as the attributes of the giver: 'The giver grows angry but not the self-controlled man; therefore, self-control is superior to a gift. He who - without anger - gives, he (attains) eternal

1) *Ibid.*, 61.9-10; also 61.16, 34.57 & 66.

2) *Ibid.*, 65.62, 68.11-12. 3) *Ibid.*, 63.16.

4) *Ibid.*, 66.18. 5) *Ibid.*, 64.4.

6) *Ibid.*, 113.6-7. 7) *Ibid.*, 113.14-17.

worlds; for anger destroys (the merit of) that gift; therefore, self-control is superior to a gift.' And when Yudhiṣṭhira asks Vyāsa which was the more important for the hereafter, giving or austerities, the great brahmin seer upholds giving:

There is nothing on earth more difficult than giving; for great is the thirst for wealth, and it is attained with hardship. ... A gift, though small, to a worthy person, given at the right time, O Yudhiṣṭhira, with a mind that is pure is known to yield endless fruit in the hereafter.²

To give up hard won and much desired wealth is no easy matter and must indicate that the giver has already abandoned many of the worldly attachments and desires that are at the root of human bondage and suffering. In other words, the ability to give is a sure sign of the development of one's religious character. Nevertheless, it is especially the giving to brahmins that is remorselessly commended in the *Mahābhārata*.

However, in the *Mahābhārata* it is *tīrthayātrā* or pilgrimage to 'fords' or 'crossing places' that receives most attention. As with meritorious teachings and gifts, the rewards of pilgrimage to sacred rivers, mountains, sea-coasts, forests and cities are of the most varied sort; but again a principal reward is its ability to free the sinner from the consequences of his folly. The concept of pilgrimage is important and very well-developed in the *Mahābhārata*, and indeed the first important Hindu expositions on the subject are to be found here. Save for an isolated reference or two,³ pilgrimage does not seem to have been of any importance in the Vedic tradition; though the Vedic veneration of rivers must have made a contribution,⁴ as must the ancient idea discussed above that sin took the form of an external pollutant that could be washed off. For the real origins of India's vast sacred geography we must, as Diana Eck writes, look to 'the non-Vedic

1) Dātā kupyati no dāntastasmāddānātparo damaḥ//
Yastu dadyādakupyānhi tasya lokāḥ sanātānāḥ/
Krodho hanti hi yaddānaṃ tasmāddānātparo damaḥ// *ibid.*, 74.14-15.

2) Dānāna duṣkarataraṃ prthivyāmasti kiṃcana/
Arthe hi mahatī tṛṣṇā sa ca duḥkhena labhyate//
Pātre dānaṃ svalpamapi kāle dattaṃ yudhiṣṭhira/
Manasā suviṣuddhena pretyānantaphalaṃ smṛtam// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 245.27 & 33.

3) See S. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, pp.3-4.

4) *Ibid.*, p.4.

tradition of indigenous India which, despite its many areas of obscurity, was most clearly a tradition of life-force deities associated with particular places. It was a locative tradition in which *genii loci* under a variety of names - *yakṣas*, *nāgas*, *gaṇas*, *mātrikās* - were associated with groves and pools, hillocks and villages, wielding power for good or ill within their areas of jurisdiction.¹ Pilgrimage to such places by all classes of society had no doubt been an important phenomenon long before the brāhmaṇical tradition started to apply its own interpretative framework in the *Mahābhārata*.

The notion of pilgrimage is developed in three major sections in the *Mahābhārata*; and the idea receives increased attention in the later Hindu tradition. In the first section, to be found in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, the god Indra bids the ṛṣi Lomaṇa to tell the Pāṇḍavas that they should visit the remote *tīrthas* while they waited for Arjuna to return from his sojourn in heaven.² Before they set off, the ṛṣi Pulastya previews the sites to be visited and the rewards to be obtained. He also suggests a major reason for the growth and importance of the whole idea. Pulastya explains that visiting *tīrthas* was a way open to all. While the *Vedas* might explain sacrifices, and the fruit of these both here and in the hereafter, nevertheless these sacrifices were beyond the poor (*na te śakyā daridreṇa*). Only kings and the affluent (*samrddhais*) had the wealth and the means to perform sacrifices. But the poor, by visiting *tīrthas*, could equal the holy rewards of sacrifices (*tulyo yajñaphalaiḥ puṇyais*); or even surpass the rewards of sacrifices. One might sacrifice with abundant sacrificial gifts yet not attain the 'fruit' or reward that visiting the *tīrthas* would bring.³ Just as important, pilgrimage

1) D.L. Eck, 'India's *Tīrthas*: "Crossings" in Sacred Geography', *History of Religions*, vol.20 (1981), p.334.

2) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 45.33-34. Arjuna was off mastering the use of magical weapons and the art of dancing.

3) *Ibid.*, 80.34-40.

was open to all *varṇas*, *çūdras* included.¹

Of the many *tīrthas* discussed by Pulastya, the rewards vary in scale quite enormously; but the description of the *tīrtha* of Puṣkara, the pre-eminent of all the *tīrthas*,² does give a reasonable idea of what was involved and the perceived rewards. According to Pulastya, at this *tīrtha* the Ādityas, Vasus, Rudras, Sādhya, and Māruts were always present, as well as the *gandharvas* and *apsarās*. And there, too, always (*nityam*) dwelt the Grandfather (Brahmā) who was honoured by gods and demons alike. This ford was famous in the triple-world and was the *tīrtha* of the God of gods (*devadevasya tīrtham*). And, Pulastya continued:

A wise (man) who desires Puṣkara, even (only) in thought, is purified of all evil and is honoured at the vault of heaven. ... The (man) who, devoted to the worship of the gods and ancestors, performs his ablutions there (attains to) a ten-fold Horse-Sacrifice; so say the wise. ... If a wise man just lives on potherbs, roots and fruits, and gives that to a brahmin, faithfully and without complaining, he achieves by that act the fruit of a Horse-Sacrifice. If, O best of kings, great souled brahmins, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiçyas* and *çūdras* bathe at this *tīrtha*, they do not go to a degraded birth. ... (And) one who, with folded hands, recalls Puṣkara in the morning and the evening, he bathes at all the *tīrthas*, O Bhārata; and (that) man attains imperishable worlds in the abode of Brahmā. (And) what evil (is done) by a man or a woman from birth onwards is all destroyed by merely bathing at Puṣkara. ... A pure and restrained (man), having dwelt at Puṣkara for 12 years, attains (the equivalent of) all the sacrifices, and goes to the world of Brahmā. (And) he who celebrates the *agnihotra* for a full one hundred years,

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- 1) *Ibid.*, 80.51. The growing interest in *tīrthas*, though, could only serve to further undermine the importance of the Vedic sacrifice, which was based on an interdependent relationship between gods and men of giving and receiving. Orthodox concern about this is reflected in a myth concerning the origins of Kurukṣetra. Formerly the great royal sage Kuru had cultivated this particular field for many years. Then Indra came down from heaven to ask him what he sought by this action. Kuru, it would seem, besought the boon that those who would die on this field would go to the world of the righteous, free of their sins. Indra derided (*avahasya*) the request and returned to heaven; but Kuru ploughed on. Thereafter Indra repeatedly came to the sage and each time he derided the idea. The other gods then advised Indra to stop the royal sage by some boon; but not the boon requested for 'if men, by dying here, go to heaven, without having performed sacrifices to us, there will not be a place for us.' (*Yadi hyatra pramītā vai svargaṃ gacchanti mānavāḥ/ Asmānaniṣṭvā kratubhirbhāgo no na bhaviṣyati*// *Çalyaparvan*, 52.11.) Indra therefore offered the *ṛṣi* a modified form of his desired boon: only those men who abandoned their bodies at Kurukṣetra through unwearied fasting, or who were slain in battle would go to heaven - as opposed to those who just died there as Kuru had first desired. This Kuru accepted. *Çalyaparvan*, 52.2-16.
- 2) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 80.55.

and he who dwells at Puṣkara for the day of the full-moon in the month of Kārttika are indeed equal. Puṣkara is hard to go to, austerities at Puṣkara are hard, gifts at Puṣkara are hard, and to dwell (at Puṣkara) is indeed very hard.¹

The general ability of *tīrthas* to 'cleanse' sinners of their wrong-doings is given prominence by Pulastya in the remainder of his account. By merely entering (*praviṣṭamātro*) the Step-of-Kumāra *tīrtha* a man is freed from his evil (*pāpebhyo vipramucyate*). By bathing at the *tīrtha* of Ḍṛmī and worshipping Rudra there a man dispels all the evils he has done since birth.² And all men who go to much praised Kurukṣetra are freed from their evil (*pāpebhyo vipramucyante*).³ In fact, the dust alone which is blown by the wind at Kurukṣetra leads even the evil-doer the highest way.⁴ *Tīrthas* even cleanse the gods of their sinful karma. It was at the *tīrtha* of Ḍṛmī that Viṣṇu formerly made himself pure (*purā ṣaucam kṛtam*) after slaying the enemies of the gods.⁵

As with meritorious teachings and giftgiving, at first glance pilgrimage might seem a comparatively easier option for those who were inclined to wrong ways.⁶ However, Pulastya indicates that this is not the true intention of pilgrimage. At the beginning of the discourse he makes it clear that only the austere, the self-

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- 1) Manasāpyabhihikāmasya puṣkarāṇi manasvinaḥ/
 Pūyante sarvapāpāni nākaprṣṭhe ca pūjyate// (45)
 Tatrabhiṣekaṃ yaḥ kuryātpitrdevārcane rataḥ/
 Aṣvamedhaṃ daṣaguṇaṃ pravadaṇṭi maṇiṣiṇaḥ// (48)
 Brāhmaṇaḥ kṣatriyo vaiṣyaḥ cūdro vā rājasattama/
 Na viyonim vrajantiyete snātāstīrthe mahātmanaḥ// (51)
 Sāyaṃ prātaḥ smaredyastu puṣkarāṇi kṛtāñjalih/
 Upasprṣṭaṃ bhavettena sarvatīrtheṣu bhārata/
 Prāpnuyācca nara lokānbrahmaṇaḥ sadane akṣayān// (53)
 Janmaprabhṛti yatpāpaṃ striyo vā puruṣasya vā/
 Puṣkare snātamātrasya sarvameva praṇaṇṇyati// (54)
 Uṣya dvādaṣa varṣāṇi puṣkare niyataḥ cūciḥ/
 Kratūnsarvānavāpnōti brahmalokaṃ ca gacchati// (56)
 Yastu varṣaṇāṃ pūrṇamagnihotraṃ upāsate/
 Kārtikīm vā vasedekāṃ puṣkare samameva tat// (57)
 Duṣkaraṃ puṣkaraṃ gantaṃ duṣkaraṃ puṣkare tapaḥ/
 Duṣkaraṃ puṣkare dānaṃ vastuṃ caiva suduṣkaram// (58) *ibid.*, 80.45-58.

2) *Ibid.*, 80.89.

3) *Ibid.*, 81.1.

4) *Ibid.*, 81.174.

5) *Ibid.*, 80.91.

6) Although the difficulties of the journey must often have been formidable.

controlled and the wise could attain the rewards of pilgrimage.

He who has thoroughly subdued his hands, feet, and mind, and he who has knowledge, austerity and renown, attains to the reward of the *tīrthas*. He who has turned away from receiving, and is contented, restrained and pure, and free of selfishness, attains to the rewards of the *tīrthas*. He who is without deceit, without enterprise, eats little, controls his senses, (and) is free from all taints, attains the reward of the *tīrthas*. And, O Indra amongst kings, he who is without anger, habituated to truth, steadfast in his vows, and who, amongst creatures is himself, he attains the reward of the *tīrthas*.¹

Pulastya concludes his discourse on the same note: only those who have undergone a marked change of character will find the *tīrthas* curative.

Those who are virtuous, educated and far-seeing have reached these *tīrthas* before, because of their perception of sacred knowledge and their piety through their purified senses. O Kauravya, no man of no vows, or who is undisciplined, impure or a thief bathes at the *tīrthas*, nor a man of crooked mind.²

However, despite Pulastya's qualifications, pilgrimage had the potential for being made a religious short-cut; and not infrequently the text adopts just this attitude. It has already been noted that if a wise man desires Puṣkara, even only in thought, he is freed of all sins and honoured in heaven. And, if one with folded hands recalls Puṣkara, morning and evening, it is the same as bathing at all the *tīrthas*. Similarly, 'one who constantly says "I shall go to Kurukṣetra, I shall dwell in Kurukṣetra", he also is freed of all evil.'³ And '(If) one desires Kurukṣetra, even in thought, O Yudhiṣṭhira, all his evils disappear and he goes to the world

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- 1) Yasya hastau ca pādau ca manaṣṣaiva susaṃyatatam/
Vidyā tapaṣṣa kīrtiṣṣa sa tīrthaphalamaṇḍite//
Pratigrahādūpāvr̥ttaḥ saṃtuṣṭo niyataḥ ṣuciḥ/
Ahaṃkāraṇivṛttaṣṣa sa tīrthaphalamaṇḍite//
Akalkako nirārambho laghvāhāro jīvendriyaḥ/
Vimuktaḥ sarvadoṣairyaḥ sa tīrthaphalamaṇḍite//
Akrodhanaṣṣa rājendra satyaṣīlo dr̥ghavrataḥ/
Ātmopamaṣṣa bhūteṣu sa tīrthaphalamaṇḍite// *ibid.*, 80.30-33.
 - 2) Bhāvitaiḥ kāraṇaiḥ pūrvamāstikyācchrutidarṣanāt/
Prāpyante tāni tīrthāni sadbhīḥ ṣiṣṭānudarṣibhīḥ//
Nāvrato nākṛtātmā ca nāṣucirna ca taskaraḥ/
Snāti tīrtheṣu kauravya na ca vakramatirnarahaḥ// *ibid.*, 83.11-12.
 - 3) Kurukṣetraṃ gamiṣyāmi kurukṣetre vasāmyaham/
Apyekāṃ vācamutsṛjya sarvapāpaiḥ pramucyate// *ibid.*, 81.176.

of Brahmā.¹ And by bathing at the *tīrthas* of Miṣṛaka one bathes at all the fords.² Finally, the celestial ṛṣi Nārada tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he who should recite at the break of day Pulastya's account of the *tīrthas*, is freed of all his sins (*sarvāpāpāḥ pramucyate*).³

The other two detailed accounts of pilgrimage occur firstly in the *Saṃvatsaraḥ* where Kṛṣṇa's older brother Balarāma prefers a tour of the *tīrthas* to taking sides in the filial slaughter; and secondly, in the *Anuṣāsanaparvan* where Bhīṣma relates to Yudhiṣṭhira how the sage Gautama had once asked Aṅgiras about the merits of visiting *tīrthas*. Both accounts emphasise the multiple rewards to be attained from visiting the *tīrthas*; and again by bathing in many of them one is purified of all sin.⁴ And this includes even the sin of brāhmaṇicide.⁵ Special consideration is given to the extraordinary purifying qualities of that foremost *tīrtha* in sanctity (*puṇyataḥ*), the Gaṅgā or Bhāgīrathī. The success a creature can attain through *tapas*, *brahmacarya*, sacrifice, and renunciation (*tyāgena*) could all be attained by dwelling at and honouring the Ganges (*gaṅgāṃ samsevyā*). One, of course, could be purified of all evils by dwelling at and bathing in the Ganges; but so powerful were the purifying effects of the Ganges that one could be freed of sins by being merely sprinkled with Ganges water (*gaṅgājālokṣitāḥ*), or by just seeing the Ganges, or even just by being touched (*spr̥ṣate*) by the wind moistened by the waves of the Gaṅgā (*gaṅgormibhir ... digdhaḥ ... pavano*).⁶ One way or another, of those falling into hell (*patato narake*) the Ganges could rescue (*tārayet*) even the vilest of men who had resort to her (*puruṣādhamān ... saṃcṛitān*).⁷

1) *Manasāpyabhikāmasya kurukṣetraṃ yudhiṣṭhira/*
Pāpāni vipraṇaṣyanti brahmalokaṃ ca gacchati// *ibid.*, 81.5.

2) *ibid.*, 81.77.

3) *ibid.*, 83.101.

4) *Āyātaparvan*, 38.16, 42.26-36, 47.27, 48.21, 48.5, 53.35; *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 26.7, 10, 12, 20, 36, 37, 44, 52, 55.

5) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 26.17 & 40.

6) *ibid.*, 27.26-55.

7) *ibid.*, 27.45.

However, in these two accounts we no longer find Pulastya's qualification that the pilgrim should already be of reformed and virtuous character.¹ What we do find, though, is a continual development of the potential of pilgrimage as a quick cure or religious short-cut. For instance, Aṅgiras explains that 'For the purpose of abiding at all the *tīrthas*, one should, with one's mind, go to those *tīrthas* which are dangerous, hard to approach and inaccessible.'² Moreover, Aṅgiras's discourse itself was the foremost of purifying things (*pāvanāmāṃ tathottamaṃ*). By reciting it every day at sunrise, one would be purified and attain to heaven (*nirmalaḥ svargamāpnuyāt*).³ One would also be freed of all sins (*mucyetsarvakilbiṣaṭh*) by reciting, or even just hearing recited, the purifying qualities of the holy Gaṅgā.⁴

The *Mahābhārata*, then, offers a wide array of means for the abrogation of the consequences of an individual's wrong-doings, all of which are quite inconsistent with any true adherence to the strict karma theory. Besides the abrogation of sin, the *Mahābhārata* also accepts the belief found in the Vedic tradition that sin and merit could be transferred or shared. Again this belief reduces the strict karma theory to a logical muddle for no one should reap the fruit of another's good or bad deeds. As Yudhiṣṭhira accepts, at death when the body is abandoned, a creature takes up his own sins for the doer alone experiences the fruit of his actions.⁵ Nevertheless, ideas of the transfer or sharing of sin and merit appear very frequently throughout the *Mahābhārata*. Many parts of the *Mahābhārata* almost look upon karma as a substance, or even a fluid, that can pass or flow from one individual to another, not just in the here and now but also through time.

- 1) Only exceptionally is there any suggestion at all that a prior change of character might be at least desirable. For instance: 'A *brahmacārī*, anger conquered, devoted to truth, and not harming creatures, having bathed in the Lake of Waters, attains the fruit of a *vājapeya* sacrifice.' (*Apāṃ hvada upasrṇya vājapeyaphalaṃ labhet/ Brahmacārī jitakrodhaḥ satyasaṃdhastvahiṇsakaḥ// ibid.*, 26.13; also cf. 26.60.
- 2) *Yānyagamyāni tīrthāni durgāni viṣamāni ca/ Manasā tāni gamyāni sarvatīrthasamāsataḥ// ibid.*, 26.61.
- 3) *Ibid.*, 26.65. 4) *Ibid.*, 27.105. 5) *Çāntiparvan*, 9.31.

In the *Mahābhārata*, many of the examples involving transfer of sin and merit occur within the family lineage, and fall within the framework of ideas pertaining to the ancestor worship of the *ṣrāddha* rites. This can be seen in the story of the great ṛṣi Jaratkāru who wandered the earth practising the severest of austerities. Then one day he saw a group of seers - in fact, his own forebears - dangling head down in a cave, supported by a single remaining thread in the form of a tuft of grass. He also saw a mouse that lived in that cave slowly gnawing through this thread. The seers were without food and were feeble and wretched. Jaratkāru was aggrieved at their situation and bade them to overcome their misfortune with a quarter of his austerities (*tapas*), or a third, or a half, or even all. But the seers explained that austerities could not remove their distress; for they were falling into an impure hell because the continuity of their family had come to an end. The seers explained that their one remaining ancestor - Jaratkāru himself - had forsaken producing offspring for practising very severe austerities (*sumahātapāḥ*). Indeed, they had fallen into their distress because of his greed for austerities (*tapaso lobhāt*). They explained that the tuft of grass from which they dangled was the thread of their line, and the mouse eating it away was mighty Time itself. They would then fall into hell as if they were sinners (*yathā duṣkṛtinas*). And when they had fallen into hell along with their ancient ancestors (*saha pūrvaiḥ pitāmahaiḥ*), Jaratkāru too would be cut down by Time and would also go to hell, despite his austerities.¹ Jaratkāru does now agree to take a wife - though on rather exacting terms - and begets a son on the sister of Vāsuki, the king of snakes.

In a similar story, the great sage Agastya sees his ancestors hanging head down in a cave. His ancestors also explain their plight as due to their lack of

1) Ādiparvan, 41.1-28.

offspring. They would only be released from their hell, and Agastya himself would only attain his goal, if he had offspring. After a typically convoluted process - for a great sage - Agastya begets the sage Dr̥ghasyu on Lopāmudrā; and Agastya's ancestors attain to the worlds they desire.' These stories highlight the outright contradiction between the strict theory of karma, in which the individual alone is responsible for his actions and fate, and the importance the *Vedas* and *Epics* attach to ancestor worship, with its emphasis on the interdependence of the family line. Thus Jaratkāru first offers to transfer his *tapas* to save his ancestors. Refusing this, the ancestors point out that without continuity of the line, they and Jaratkāru were headed for hell as if they were sinners, not because they are real sinners. In fact, the ancestors have fallen from heaven not through their sins, but through the failure of the later family to continue the line, which alone enabled a continued transfer of merit and sustenance through the generations.

In the *Mahābhārata* there are to be found a great many examples of the transfer of sin and merit within the family network. Significantly, the effect is normally - though not always - said to pass to the seventh generation, which is consistent with the theory of the *ṣrāddha* rite.

For instance, when the great seer Bhṛgu curses the god Agni for giving away the identity of his much beloved wife Pulomā to the terrible *rākṣasa* Puloman, Agni defends his conduct. Agni argues that a witness who did not answer truly when asked, would destroy (*hanyāt*) his ancestors (*pūrvān*) and descendants (*parān*) to the seventh generation.² The seer Upamanyu, after reciting the 1,000 names of Ṣiva, adds that he who holds forth against Ṣiva goes to hell along with his ancestors and descendants (*narakam yāti saha pūrvaiḥ sahānugaiḥ*).³ And the ancestors of one who despises Nārāyaṇa sink into eternal hell.⁴ According to the wise bird Pūjanī,

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 94-97.
3) Anuṣāsanaparvan 17.17.

2) Ādiparvan, 7.2-3.
4) Ṣāntiparvan, 334.6.

who knew all *dharma* (*sarvadharmajñā*), any evil deed that was done, if not found in the doer, would fall upon his sons, or his sons' sons or his daughters' sons.¹ In the story of Ekata, Dvita, and Trita, the latter curses his deceiving and false brothers to become beasts of prey. But, more significantly, he curses their offspring (*prasavas*) to be born as monkeys, bears and apes.² After Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna had slain the defenceless Droṇa, Sātyaki forcefully condemns not just him, but the lineage which was responsible for his existence: 'Having attained you, a defiler of your family, your kinsmen - seven generations of descendants (and) also seven generations of ancestors - abandoned by their glory, have fallen (into hell).'³ The ancestors and descendants of miscreant kings were also very vulnerable. Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira that a king who should wrongly slay a messenger would cause his ancestors to incur the sin of killing a foetus (*pitarastasya bhrūṇahatyām-avāpnuyuh*).⁴ Nor should a king take wealth from the weak (*durbalam*), for the tears shed by the weeping of those who are falsely accused would destroy the children and even the animals of those who governed falsely.⁵

1) Çāntiparvan, 137.19.

2) Çalyaparvan, 35.7-51.

3) Saptāware tathā pūrve bāndhavāste nipātītāḥ/

Yaçasā ca parityaktāstvām prāpya kulapāṇsanam// Droṇaparvan, 169.14.

4) Çāntiparvan, 86.26.

5) *Ibid.*, 92.19. It is worth noting that in the story of King Yayāti there is an instance of the transfer of sin of a more curious kind, for here the transfer is only temporary. In this story King Yayāti is married to Devayānī, the daughter of Çukra, the priest of the *asuras*, and on her he has two sons. However, Çarmiṣṭhā, the daughter of the king of *asuras*, is enslaved to Devayānī as a handmaid, the result of a past quarrel. And on Çarmiṣṭhā King Yayāti secretly begets three sons. When Devayānī eventually discovers her husband's infidelity she returns to her father, with her eyes red with anger and filled with tears. For his infraction of *dharma*, Çukra curses the king: 'Therefore old age, hard to conquer, shall fall upon you this instant.' (*Tasmājjarā tvāmacirāddharṣayiṣyati durjayā*// Ādiparvan, 78.30) Yayāti then pleaded for consideration (*prasādam kuru me*) for he had not yet satisfied his youth on Devayānī (*atṛpto yauvanasyāham devayānyām*). Çukra agreed to modify the curse by permitting Yayāti to transfer his old age to another if he so wished; to which Yayāti proposed that whichever son should agree, should share in his kingdom (*rājyabhāk*), his merit (*puṇyabhāk*) and his fame (*kīrtibhāk*). Yayāti then approached each of his five sons

Merit is also frequently transferred within the family lineage. An important example of this is to be found within the story of Yayāti. After his fall from heaven, Yayāti explains to his royal enquirers the new theory of transmigration and karma from the point of view of one about to go through the experience. Desiring to save their elder from this plight, Yayāti's royal companions successively press him to accept whatever worlds (*lokāḥ*) they had won with their deeds either in heaven (*divi*) or the sky (*antarikṣe*). Having given away their meritorious worlds, they were each prepared to go to hell. Yayāti commends their generosity, but refuses. Kings, he proudly asserted, did not accept gifts. However, their generosity and Yayāti's dignified refusal proved sufficient in itself to achieve the purpose of the four kings. For the gods were impressed, and five golden chariots appeared ready to carry them to heaven. On the way to heaven Yayāti reveals himself as the grandfather of the four kings.¹ In this way, the exceedingly great-souled (*mahātmā ... atīva*) Yayāti, vanquisher of his foes, was saved by his own grandsons (*svairdauhitrais-tārīto*).²

Many of the rewards that may be won through gifts, pilgrimage, austerities and so on, are often said to benefit not just the doer and his immediate family, but also his descendants and progeny. For instance, by seeing, touching and bathing in the Gaṅgā a man rescues (*tārayate*) his ancestors and descendants to the seventh degree (*saptāvarānsapta parānpitṛn*).³ By bathing at the Womb-of-Brahmā (*brahmayoniṃ*) *tīrtha* one attains to the world of Brahmā, and purifies his family to seven generations.⁴ And by bathing at the *tīrtha* of Kulāmpuna, a man purifies

in turn and proposed that they should take upon themselves his sin along with his old age (*pratipadyasva pāpmānaṃ jarayā saha*) while he satisfied his senses with their youth. At the end of a thousand years he would return their youth and receive back his sin and old age. Only Puru, the youngest son, agreed to this, and without hesitation. Puru duly became the next king; and the Pāṇḍavas were his descendants. (*Ādiparvan*, 77-79).

1) *Ādiparvan*, 87.8 - 88.21.

2) *Ibid.*, 88.26.

3) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 27.61-62.

4) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 81.121; also 81.131-2.

his family (*punāti svakulam narah*).¹ A gift of earth not only expiates the sin of sorcery (*krtyā*) but purifies ten generations on both sides of the giver's family (*punātyubhayato daṣa*).² Or, again, he who gives land is said to rescue (*paritrāti*) five generations of ancestors and six generations of descendants (*pañca pūrvādi-puruṣāḥ ṣaṭ*).³ Through a gift of cows, the giver rescues seven generations of ancestors and descendants (*tārayate sapta pūrvāṇstathā parān*); and by giving a present of gold as well, one rescues twice that number (*dviḡuṇam*).⁴ And a man who gives away hundreds of thousands of cows bestows on both his maternal and paternal ancestors (*mātāpitroḥ pitāmahān*) to the tenth generation the worlds of the righteous (*sukṛtāṇilokān*) and purifies his family (*punāti ca kulam*).⁵ He who excavates a reservoir from which cows and virtuous men always drink water, rescues his entire family (*sa kulam tārayetsarvam*).⁶ Similarly, by giving a shelter to enable cows to withstand the cold and rain, the giver rescues his family up to the seventh generation (*āsaptamaṃ tārayati kulam*).⁷ And if one of righteous disposition offers oblations into the fire for seven years, he purifies seven generations of ancestors and descendants by his own acts (*ātmanaḥ karmabhiḥ svaiḥ*).⁸ And by worshipping all the gods at *ṣrāddha* ceremonies, the ancestors of the persons performing them are freed of their sins.⁹ A man who gives to a brahmin, possessed of good qualities, saves his entire family in this world.¹⁰ And imperishable food and drink (*akṣayyamannapānam*) comes to the ancestors of a man who makes brahmins listen to even a quarter couplet of the *Mahābhārata* at a *ṣrāddha* rite.¹¹

Another interesting example of merit transfer, this time between brothers, and husband and wife, occurs in the last book of the *Mahābhārata*. Arriving in heaven,

1) *Ibid.*, 81.88; also 80.129.

3) *Ibid.*, 61.56.

5) *Ibid.*, 79.8; also 83.25-7.

7) *Ibid.*, 65.29.

9) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 91.28.

11) *Ādiparvan*, 1.203.

2) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 61.34.

4) *Ibid.*, 73.8.

6) *Ibid.*, 99.16; also 64.5.

8) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 184.11.

10) *Ibid.*, 23.37-8.

Yudhiṣṭhira finds Duryodhana seated in glory but can find no trace of his brothers or Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira was indignant (*amarṣitaḥ*), and insisted that for him heaven was only to be found where his brothers were.¹ The messenger of the gods therefore took Yudhiṣṭhira down to the dark, foul miseries of hell. Yudhiṣṭhira was filled with sorrow and grief (*duḥkhaṣokaśamanvitaḥ*) at the spectacle, but as he turns to go back there are pitiful cries (*dīnā vācaḥ*) that he should stay a moment (*muhūrtakam*) longer; for from the body of the always virtuous Yudhiṣṭhira there came a purifying breeze (*puṇyaḥ samīraṇaḥ*) which brought relief to them (*yenāsmānsukhamāgamat*).² The voices are revealed as those of his brothers and their sons, and his wife. Yudhiṣṭhira actually gives way to anger, and censures (*garhayāmāsa*) the gods including Dharma.³ However, Indra reveals the scene as an illusion in order to purge Yudhiṣṭhira of his guilt in deceiving Droṇa about his son in the great battle.⁴ His brothers and Draupadī were really to be found in heaven, to which Yudhiṣṭhira then repairs. Even though the whole scene is a divine deception, the idea of transfer of merit is clear enough; Yudhiṣṭhira's accumulated virtue or merit was sufficient to relieve the karmic torments of his nearest and dearest.

It may, then, be concluded that the frequency of ideas concerning the transfer of sin and merit owes much to the importance attached to ancestor worship in the developed Hindu tradition. However, various examples of a more general transfer of sin and merit indicate that it was not just confined to ancestor worship. An interesting example of this occurs in the story of King Somaka and his 100 sons. Though the story recognises the strict theory of karma, the ideas contained in it seem particularly archaic and yield some strange consequences for the law of karma. King Somaka, it is related, desired sons, and married 100 wives to this end. But in spite of great efforts (*yatnena mahatā*) he produced but one son, named Jantu; and

1) Svargārohaṇaparvan, 1.1 - 2.12.

3) *Ibid.*, 2.50.

2) *Ibid.*, 2.31-33.

4) *Ibid.*, 3.10-15.

then only when he was old. Having only one son was a source of much worry to the king; so, concerned for his lineage, he asked his priest if there was not some 'rite' (*karman*) by which he could beget 100 sons. Now one priest did know of such a rite but it entailed the sacrifice of the king's solitary son. The priest (*ṛtvik*) explained that he would lay out the sacrifice, and then the king must sacrifice his son. As the boy's caul (*vapā*) was being offered up the king's wives should inhale the smoke (*dhūmamāghrāya*), and then they would give birth to very manly (*sumahāvīryān*) sons. Whatsmore, the original son Jantu, would be born again from the same mother.'

King Somaka agreed, and Jantu was sacrificed despite the grief-filled efforts of the king's many wives to prevent this. Ten months later Somaka had 100 sons with Jantu the first of these. Now, in the course of time, Somaka's priest died and went to the world of Yama, and was soon followed by Somaka himself. There Somaka saw his priest cooking in a terrible hell (*narake ghore pacyamānam*). This, the tormented priest explained, was the fruit (*phala*) of the sacrifice he had performed for the king. King Somaka now addressed King Dharma: 'I shall enter here (into hell); let my sacrificial priest be freed. For this most illustrious (man) is cooked by the fires of hell because of my doing.'² But King Dharma, adhering to the strict law of karma, objected: 'O King, no one else ever experiences the fruit of the doer.'³ Somaka, though, persisted. He had committed the same deed as his priest (*karmanāsyā samo hyaham*) and therefore the fruit, good or bad (*puṇyāpuṇyaphalam*), should be the same for both of them. Without his priest, he desired not the holy worlds (*puṇyānna kāmāye lokān*) he had won through his acts of giving. Dharma now relented: 'If, O King, you desire thus, (then) experience the fruit together with him for an equal length of time; thereafter you will attain the way of the righteous.'⁴ This Somaka did; and afterwards he again attained the pure worlds he had conquered with his own

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 127.1-21.

2) Ahamatra pravekṣyāmi mucyatām mama yājakaḥ/
Matkṛte hi mahābhāgaḥ pacyate narakāgninā// *ibid.*, 128.12.

3) Nānyaḥ kartuḥ phalam rājannupabhuṅkte kadācana/ *ibid.*, 128.13.

4) Yadyevamīpsitaṁ rājanbhuṅkṣvāsyā sahitaḥ phalam/
Tulyakālam sahānena paṇḍitprāpsyasi sadgatim// *ibid.*, 128.16.

acts, along with his priest and guru, for he loved his guru (*sa gurupriyaḥ*).¹

In this story there are a number of complicated transfers of sin and merit. Initially, the merit or virtue of Somaka's only son is shared out to bring into existence 99 other sons, with the original son reborn as the one hundredth. The means for this transfer is very physical and primitive: human sacrifice with inhalation of the smoke from the sacrificial offering. Then King Somaka offers to change places with his priest in hell, presumably on the basis that he took upon himself the priest's bad karma, while the priest was freed with the king's good karma accumulated from acts of giving. This arrangement the God Dharma would not accept, and in support cites the basic fact of the law of karma; the doer alone experiences the consequences of his actions. However, the God does accept Somaka's compromise proposal that they share the bad karma. And after the king has shared the priest's bad karma, the priest shares the king's good karma by following his ruler to heaven.

Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, transfers of sin and merit are referred to under various circumstances. A common idea is that a king who fails to protect his subjects and kingdom from affliction takes upon himself or reaps at least a portion of the sins committed in his kingdom. The portion the king reaps is variously said to be a quarter, or half, or even all.² On the other hand, it is said that a king who protects his subjects acquires a quarter of the merit or virtue (*dharma*) that they have acquired through study, sacrifice, gift and worship.³ By the strict law of karma it would be expected that the subjects should look to their own karma as the cause of their affliction or prosperity; but instead it is the king who receives the blame or praise and who reaps some portion of the sin or merit.

There are other general transfers of sin and merit with similarly strange consequences for the strict law of karma. For instance, it is said that a man who gives with the highest faith (*çraddhayā parayā*) to the foremost of brahmins

1) *Ibid.*, 128.17.

2) *Çāntiparvan*, 25.12, 25.19, 70.27-28, 76.8, 77.12, 137.97; *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 60.22.

3) *Çāntiparvan*, 67.26, 76.7.

(*brāhmaṇāgrebhyah*) acquires a sixth portion of that brahmin's merit from his sacred ablutions (*upasparṇaṣaḍbhāgaṃ labhate*).¹ And Bhīṣma, discussing the duties of a householder, points out that: 'Having received a worthy and honourable guest, (the householder) who honours him not, having given him his good deeds, that unhonourable (householder) will be ruined.'² In this instance, the householder who fails in his duty has his merit transferred to his honoured guest. Elsewhere there is a more complete transfer. The guest who is improperly received takes away the householder's merits (*punyaṃ*) and transfers his sins (*duṣkṛtaṃ*).³ There is a similar complete transfer in the case of an abuser, and one who endures the abuse: the abuser not only loses his merit to the other, but receives the accumulated sins of the victim. 'He who is not angered acquires the virtuous marks of the abuser; (and) the endurer (gives) his own sin; the non-endurer is angered.'⁴

There are also examples of where the merit from the performance of ascetic austerities can be transferred to help overcome bad karma. Bhīṣma recounts one such story involving the great sage Vyāsa and a worm (*kīṭa*). The worm had been a wealthy *çūdra* who had been cruel and not devoted to brahmins. Vyāsa then helps the worm to restore itself to the human condition, until in the course of successive births through the various *varṇa* he becomes a brahmin. Vyāsa reassures the worm that there was no stronger power than that of *tapas*: 'For, because of the strength of my *tapas*, I am able to rescue (creatures) through the mere sight (of myself).'⁵ Similarly, the great seer Cyavana, in one of his various appearances in the *Mahābhārata*, frees the Niṣāda fishermen of their sin (*muktakīlbiṣāḥ*) in catching fish by his mere word (*vākyena*). The fishermen and the fish then proceed to

1) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 64.13.

2) Pātraṃ tvatithimāsādya çīlāḍhyaṃ yo na pūjayet/
Sa dattvā sukṛtaṃ tasya kṣapayeta hyanarcitaḥ// *ibid.*, 2.92.

3) Çāntiparvan, 184.12.

4) Aruṣyankruṣyamānasya sukṛtaṃ nāma vindati/
Duṣkṛtaṃ cātmano marṣī ruṣyatyevāpamārṣti vai// Çāntiparvan, 115.3.

5) Ahaṃ hī darṇanādeva tārayāmi tapobalāt/ Anuṣāsanaparvan, 119.2.

heaven.¹

The presence in the Hindu tradition of ideas based on the abrogation of sin and on the transfer of sin and merit has of course been noted frequently enough before. These ideas have been variously considered as 'modifications' of a pure karma theory,² or more fundamentally as 'contradictions'.³ While such views assume a pure theory that has been modified or corrupted, more recent writers have preferred to see the karma theory as not unitary but plural. This is most apparent in the proposal to 'construct a typology of karma theories', and some day even to 'present family trees of karma theories, grids of karma theories, a kind of police Identikit for all theoretically possible as well as actually occurring karma theories.'⁴ Within this family tree, a fundamental division has been suggested between what has been called the 'transference of karma interpretation' and the 'non-transference of karma interpretation'; a division which in turn reflects what are often considered as the most important orientations or value systems within Hindu culture - the approaches of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*.⁵ The difference in approach symbolised by these important words is well indicated in their literal meaning. *Pravṛtti* means 'rolling onwards' or 'act of turning around', so the essential idea is that of movement and activity.

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- 1) *Ibid.*, 50.39-40. Compare, too, the story of the ascetic daughter of the seer Kuṇḍirgārgya, who, when very old and after a lifetime of penances (*tapas*), found she could not enter heaven for she had not been married. Proceeding to an assemblage of *ṛṣis* she offered to give half her penances (*tapaso ardham prayacchāmi*) to the seer who would marry her. A seer named Ṣṛṅgavāt agreed on condition that she should live with him for one night only. But for that night she again became a beautiful young woman. *Çalyaparvan*, 51.1-23.
 - 2) See Hopkins, 'Modifications of the Karma Doctrine', *op.cit.*, pp.581-93; and Hopkins, 'More about Modifications of the Karma Doctrine', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol.xxviii (1907), pp.665-72; H.G. Narahari, 'The Doctrine of Karma in Popular Hinduism', *The Aryan Path*, February 1972, pp.53-58; H.G. Narahari, 'Karma and Rebirth in the Mahābhārata', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol.27 (1946), pp.102-13.
 - 3) U. Arya, 'Hindu Contradictions of the Doctrine of Karma', *East and West* (Rome), vol.22, no.1-2, 1972, pp.93-100.
 - 4) O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.xi-xii.
 - 5) See the discussion by K. Potter 'The Karma Theory and Its Interpretation in Some Indian Philosophical Systems,' in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.260-67.

By contrast, *nivṛtti* means 'act of turning back' or 'act of returning', the essential idea being the abandonment of activity. The approach of *pravṛtti* is associated with the fulfillment of one's social or *varṇāśrama* duties; with the pursuit of the first three ends of Hindu culture, *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*; with the householder or *grhastha* stage of life, and the village or town community; and with the attainment of heaven and a better rebirth. This approach is best represented in the *dharmaśāstra*, *purāṇic*, and later *bhakti* literature. The approach of *nivṛtti* is associated with the renunciation of social duties and society; with the pursuit of the fourth end of Hindu culture, *mokṣa*; with the ascetic or *saṃnyāsin* and forest life; and with release from the bondage of karma and rebirth, and liberation from time and space. This approach is best represented in the Hindu philosophical literature.¹ In brief, we have the values and approach of orthodox Hindu society contrasted with the values and approach of the world-renouncing ascetics. These terms, it is important to note, are used in the texts themselves; they are not just convenient labels.² In the *Mahābhārata*, the approaches of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are not infrequently the subject of polemical discourse, more particularly by the proponents of *pravṛtti*.³

Admittedly, efforts have been made to subsume the *pravṛtti*/transfer of karma, and the *nivṛtti*/non-transfer of karma models under one unitary theory of karma,⁴ or simply to explain away the supposed significance of the dichotomy.⁵ Nevertheless,

1) See *ibid.*, pp.260-7; O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.xiii-xxi; G.J. Larson, 'Karma as a "Sociology of Knowledge" or "Social Psychology" of Process/Praxis' in O'Flaherty, *op.cit.*, pp.303-6; W.D. O'Flaherty, *Ascetism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Īiva*; J.G. Held, *The Mahābhārata: An Ethnological Study*, pp.145-6; L. Dumont, 'World Renunciation in Indian Religions', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, no. iv (1960), pp.33-62.

2) Potter, *op.cit.*, p.265.

3) See, for instance, *Ālyaparvan*, 49, 51; *Āntiparvan*, 7 - 25, 169, 184, 207, 212, 222, 226, 235, 261, 284, 308, 342; *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 2, 93, 129; *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, 44.16.

4) Larson, *op.cit.*, pp.303-16.

5) A.K. Gangadean, 'Comparative Ontology and the Interpretation of "Karma"', *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.6, no.2, 1979.

from what has been said so far in this chapter, it should be apparent that the best way of making sense of the diverse material on karma in the *Mahābhārata* is to accept the idea that ultimately there are two quite separate and incompatible theories represented in the text: a theory of essentially pre-Upaniṣadic origins which accepts abrogation of sin and the transfer of sin and merit; and a theory, to be first found in the *Upaniṣads*, which holds each individual to be an autonomous moral entity, severely responsible for their own actions alone.

Whatsmore, in the *Mahābhārata* the most satisfactory explanation for the differences between these theories is in terms of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. This is particularly apparent from the settings of the major teachings on karma, which have been examined above. It is significant that of the five major expositions of the strict karma theory, all, except one, immediately cast aside the logic of their teaching by incorporating into the framework of the story the idea of the abrogation or transfer of sin and merit. It will be recalled that King Yayāti is saved from the effects of his own bad karma by a transfer of merit from his grandsons. And after the teachings of Mārkaṇḍeya and the wise hunter, the listener is assured that the consequences of one's sins may be overcome by repentance and the pursuit of *dharma* thereafter. Bṛhaspati, after his explanation of karma, offers Yudhiṣṭhira an even more generous choice of sin destroying methods: repentance, confession, gifts, and following the path of the righteous. Now, as we have seen, the principal concern of these brāhmanic teachings on karma is really with *dharma*, or the pursuit of the *varṇāśrama* duties so basic to orthodox society. This was all the more important at a time when the *pravṛtti* values that underlay orthodox society were being increasingly challenged by the growth in popularity of India's ascetic or *nivṛtti* tradition based on life in the forest.

It can be suggested that the new strict theory of karma would have been difficult for the orthodox tradition to swallow at the best of times. The pressure from the new found popularity of the ascetic tradition made its full acceptance even harder. The difficulty was that a theory that made each individual responsible for

the consequences of his own actions could only be biased against the *pravṛtti* orientation which enjoined action, and in favour of the *nivṛtti* orientation which enjoined renunciation of action.¹ By the new theory, the fulfillment of all the ordained social duties of orthodox society, with its emphasis on reciprocal obligations, was a sentence to endless rebirth and karmic suffering. If the orthodox *pravṛtti* tradition was to accept in full the new theory it could only encourage those enmeshed in society to throw up their karmic producing social duties for the life of a forest mendicant where actions could be controlled and reduced to a minimum, and where temptations were in any case minimal. Given this, the pre-Upaniṣadic approach to karma, which accepted a connection between action and consequence, but not an inescapable one, was much more compatible with the orthodox concern for *dharma*.

The one brāhmaṇical teaching on karma that does not - explicitly at least - incorporate the ideas of abrogation and transfer of sin, nonetheless still lends weight to these conclusions. This is the teaching of Kaṣyapa which is to be found at the beginning of the philosophical text, the *Anugītā*. However, we have already noted that the principal concern of the *Anugītā* is not obedience to social duties or *dharma*, but the acquisition of the saving knowledge necessary for *mokṣa*; and, of course, the same can be said for much of the *Mokṣadharmā*. To this extent, these philosophical sections of the *Mahābhārata* veer towards the *nivṛtti* orientation in their concerns.²

In similar fashion, the framework or setting for much of the teaching on the dissipation of sin, and the transfer of sin and merit, takes place in terms of the competing value systems of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. Much of this teaching is to be found in the *Çāntiparvan* and the *Anuṣāsanaparvan*. At the beginning of the

1) Indeed, the strict theory of karma is so well-suited to the ascetic tradition and so ill-suited to the orthodox tradition that it must support suggestions that the whole concept arose from 'the indigenous Gangetic tradition from which the various *Çramaṇa* movements arose.' Jaini, *op.cit.*, p.218.

2) Though there is much *pravṛtti* material in the *Mokṣadharmā* as well.

Çāntiparvan we find Yudhiṣṭhira overcome with grief and remorse, and burdened with feelings of sin at what the *kṣatriya dharma* of orthodox society had led them to. Yudhiṣṭhira, to say the least, is a curious creature for an Epic hero. By nature he is a virtual pacifist, hating everything to do with war; and he has more the qualities of a forgiving and gentle saint than a warrior. Now, faced with the prospect of taking up the throne he had so bloodily won and continuing to perform his *kṣatriya* duties, Yudhiṣṭhira recoils and scathingly condemns his ordained *dharma*.¹ Instead, Yudhiṣṭhira proposes to renounce all possessions preparatory to returning to the forest and the life of a mendicant - a *nivṛtti* mode of life in which he had already passed 12 years.

Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers, and the long-suffering Draupadī, finally lose all patience with the ways of their older brother and husband, whom they are duty bound to obey. One after another they stand forth and vent the traditional orthodox *pravṛtti* arguments against Yudhiṣṭhira's position; and they are followed by assorted great *ṛṣis*, and Bhīṣma's interminable teachings on *dharma*. Though the teachings presented cover a vast array of topics, they are presented within the context of finding a solution for Yudhiṣṭhira's inner-conflict. The solution they propound for Yudhiṣṭhira's feelings of grief and sin is not the forest life of the renouncer, but adherence to orthodox *dharma* and the performance of expiations.

In these *parvans* as a whole the attitude displayed towards Yudhiṣṭhira's proposed adoption of a *nivṛtti* course of life varies. There are frequent passages which unequivocally assert the supremacy of the householder and *pravṛtti* values.² Though equally there are some passages that just as uncompromisingly assert the supremacy of *nivṛtti* values.³ However, attempts at reconciliation are also in evidence. One such attempt can be seen in the addition of *mokṣa* or 'liberation' to the traditional three aims of orthodox Hindu society (*puruṣārthas*), *kāma*, *artha* and

1) *Çāntiparvan*, 7.5-10.

2) For instance, *ibid.*, 8, 10-16, 18, 20-23, 25, 161, 184, 226, 235, 261, 308; *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 2, 93.

3) For instance, *Çāntiparvan*, 169, 207-8, 212, 222, 284, 342.

dharma. *Mokṣa* reflects *nivṛtti* values, while the other three reflect *pravṛtti* values. However, at best this compromise was theoretical; and even some of the verses that make it still reflect the difficulty in practice of linking *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* values: 'This class was called the *trivarga* (triple-division) by Svayambhū. Indeed, there is a fourth (division) called *mokṣa*, which is a separate class and has a separate purpose.'¹ As well, this orthodox acceptance of a fourth aim of life was heavily qualified, for it was only acceptable at certain stages of an individual's life. This brought up another and more important attempt at reconciliation, the *ācrama* theory,² the details of which are frequently explained to Yudhiṣṭhira. By this theory an individual's life should in succession pass through the *brahmacarya*, *grhastha*, *vānaprastha*, and *saṃnyāsin* stages of life. During the first and fourth stages, an individual's life would conform to *nivṛtti* values, and to *pravṛtti* values in the vital second stage. The third or *vānaprastha* stage is an attempt to blend the two approaches, for here the individual should live as a *saṃnyāsin* in a forest hermitage, but with his wife, and while continuing to perform sacrifices. By this compromise Yudhiṣṭhira's proposed retreat to the forest and pursuance of *mokṣa* was not wrong as such, just wrongly timed. However, at no time does Yudhiṣṭhira show any particular enthusiasm for this proffered compromise; and indeed Hindu society generally seems to have shared his feelings.³ Given the scale of Yudhiṣṭhira's dilemma, it was more in the nature of a capitulation to *pravṛtti* values than a compromise.

In the end, Yudhiṣṭhira does give way (capitulate?) to his *pravṛtti* opposition. He agrees to take the throne and rule his kingdom. His retreat to the forest is deferred to later life; though even then the goal is the *pravṛtti* one of heaven and

1) *Trivarga iti vikhyāto gaṇa eṣa svayambhuvā/*

Caturtho mokṣa ityeva prthagarthah prthaggaṇah// *Çāntiparvan*, 59.30.

2) For an analysis of the process by which the heterodox practices of the ascetics were assimilated into orthodoxy as the *vānaprastha* and *saṃnyāsin* stages of life, see W.O. Kaelber, 'The *Brahmacārin*: Homology and Continuity in Brāhmaṇic Religion', *History of Religions*, vol.21, no.1 (1981), pp.77-99.

3) Professor O'Flaherty has shown the inadequacy of this compromise in her analysis of Āiivite mythology. O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism* ... op.cit., pp.79-83.

not the *nivṛtti* one of *mokṣa*. And significantly, it is their view of karma that he accepts by agreeing to perform an expiation in the form of the great Horse-Sacrifice.

Elsewhere, though, the *Mahābhārata* does offer another more significant and ultimately more successful attempt to reconcile the way of renunciation and its *nivṛtti* values with the *pravṛtti* orientation of orthodox society. This reconciliation is developed at length by one of the most perceptive of orthodox thinkers, the author(s) of the *Bhagavadgītā*. However, as we have seen, the seer Sanatsujāta offers Dhṛtarāṣṭra a glimpse of this revised interpretation of the law of karma, by which it was not the act itself that inevitably led to experiencing the consequences or fruit, but the desire for the fruit of action. Karmic suffering and rebirth then, were to be avoided not by retreat to the forest and the renunciation of action, but by the renunciation of desire. By this interpretation, an individual, so long as he renounced all desire, could continue to perform the actions and duties demanded by orthodox *pravṛtti* society without undergoing karmic suffering and rebirth. The advantages of the *nivṛtti* approach could be attained while continuing to adhere to the way of *pravṛtti*. Whatsmore, though it had been adapted to the requirements of *pravṛtti* orthodoxy, the strict logic of the new law of karma remained intact.

With this solution available, we may wonder why Yudhiṣṭhira should spend the whole of the *Çāntiparvan* and *Anuṣāsanaparvan* in inner-conflict and anguish. In terms of the text, the simple answer would be that he did not know of it, for this reconciliation is only explained to Arjuna (who promptly forgets it), and in some secrecy to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The great bulk of the *Mahābhārata* shares Yudhiṣṭhira's ignorance and pays no heed to this compromise solution. The more normal reaction of the *Mahābhārata* to the new theory of karma was to accept the idea of transmigration; but then either to ignore the new idea of karma in favour of the pre-Upaniṣadic approach to sin and human action, or to set up the new law only to promptly knock it down by allowing the abrogation of sin, and the transfer of sin and merit. This is not to say that the strict law of karma is never recognised. It

does make an appearance in the more philosophical sections of the *Mahābhārata* - notably the *Mokṣadharmā* and the *Anuśāsanaparva* - where the concern is primarily with *mokṣa* and *nivṛtti* values. But the *Mahābhārata* is overwhelmingly concerned with *dharma* and *pravṛtti* values; and here the strict law of karma is either ignored or is little more than a straw man.

What are the consequences of all this for the problem of fate and free-will? It has already been argued that the strict law of karma provides a quite plausible solution to the problem. To recapitulate, by the strict law of karma, all that happens to an individual in this life is determined by that individual's actions in previous lives; and therefore the law of karma accepts the order and predictability of the deterministic view of the universe. But free-will is also accepted, for the lot of the doer in future lives is being determined by what he does in this life. At any particular point in time, an individual is subject to the sway of deterministic forces but is free to exercise his own meaningful choices. However, as the karmic stream represents the experiences of one 'self' viewed through time, then it is important to note that determinism is the result not of outside forces beyond his control, but of his own prior deeds. The individual self alone is the arbiter of his own destiny; and the theory should lay to rest the ghosts of fate, predestination and chance.

However, it is apparent that though the *Mahābhārata* has much to say about karma or action, only a limited portion of this has anything to do with the strict law of karma in its unqualified form. And the remainder of what the *Mahābhārata* has to say about karma does not provide any true solution to the dichotomy of fate and free-will, because of its acceptance of the ideas of abrogation of sin, and transfer of sin and merit. For instance, by the strict law of karma the sufferings experienced in this life should be attributable to the wrongs of previous lives, for which the individual, viewed as an entity through time, is directly responsible. However, the *Mahābhārata*'s considerable preoccupation with ways to avoid the

consequences of sin must work to destroy this sense of direct responsibility. The emphasis is not so much on facing up to the consequences of sin as on escaping them. This could only encourage a refusal to truly accept that the fruition of past wrongs in this life was really the current individual's direct responsibility. Consequently, the deterministic side of the law of karma will come to seem like any other impersonal force beyond the current individual's control. Karma is no longer the deserved fruition of past deeds but another term for inscrutable fate or the mischief of the gods.

The idea of transference of sin and merit must also foster the same attitude towards karma. In part, it must further weaken any sense of responsibility for past deeds. By the strict law of karma, it just makes no sense if the karmic stream can be diverted towards other people. The end result is that the karmic stream will become dissipated and lost, and no one in particular will experience the results or feel any responsibility. In addition, if sin and merit can be transferred willy nilly amongst members of a family be they past or present, or between strangers or even between gods and men, then the individual can scarcely be considered as an autonomous entity in charge of his own destiny. Factors that are beyond the individual's control are as important in determining the individual's lot as his own actions. Again, karma becomes little more than inscrutable fate.

Chapter 2: Predestination

Belief in predestination and fate arise naturally from our experiences as human beings. While the strict theory of karma purportedly placed the destiny of the individual in his own hands, the difficulty was that this did not seem to correspond to the more essential experiences of the unenlightened individual's immediate life. At the level of the temporal individual, the very knowledge of the inevitability of the death which awaits all must encourage belief in some super-human power that determines the individual's life-term. In addition, there is the feeling that many important events in life happen to, or more correctly come upon the individual from the outside or the beyond; and the individual feels he has little or no power to control or change these. It is felt that what was done or what happened was 'fated' to happen. The feeling may not correspond to reality, but it is still felt.

At the level of society and nature, the same feelings readily arise. Once agriculture had become the source of livelihood, man was compelled to rely on nature, the seasons, the weather, and the soil for his sustenance and survival. In the cycles of nature and the seasons, with their invariable birth and death, generation and decay, it was only too easy to perceive the working of a superhuman power (or powers) that too often seemed inescapable and invariable. Therefore, from his own experiences the individual can come to feel that the major, or even all, events of life and the world around are 'pre-destined' or 'fated' to happen; and that they are predetermined by some superhuman power or agency. Such feelings are probably universal.¹

In the *Mahābhārata*, belief in destiny and fate is pervasive indeed. They, rather than karma and individual effort, are probably the most commonly called upon factors

1) For some general discussion on the problem of fate and predestination, see H. Ringgren, 'The Problem of Fatalism' in H. Ringgren (ed.), Fatalistic Beliefs in Religion, Folklore and Literature, pp.7-18; 'Human Freedom and Fatalism' in R.T. Blackwood and A.L. Herman (eds.), Problems in Philosophy: West and East, pp.357-60; and B.C. Dietrich, Death, Fate and the Gods: The development of a religious idea in Greek popular belief and Homer, pp.1-7.

to explain human action and change in general. Indeed, in his efforts to come to terms with these feelings of fate and destiny, Epic man has gone to much effort to define and interpret what it is that happens to him; and there are innumerable statements in the *Mahābhārata* that concern fate in one way or another. But attempting to classify these statements is no easy task.

At this point, though, a basic division can be imposed between predestination and fate proper, although the distinction is at times blurred. It is also important not to confuse these terms with that of determinism. Determinism merely holds that all events are caused. If we ask 'Caused by what?', the answer would be 'Caused by preceding events'. But if we ask 'Caused by whom?', then the answer may be 'A personal God' or 'An impersonal force'. If the answer is a personal god, we have predestination; and if it is an impersonal force, then we have fate proper. So, for our purposes, predestination may be considered to be the view that events are fore-ordained or pre-planned by a personal God or gods; while fate is the view that they are fore-ordained by some impersonal force or power in the universe. According to both views, events happen according to a prior plan. Whether this plan - be its origins personal or impersonal - works for good or ill, with reason or without, is beside the point.¹ In the remainder of this chapter we shall consider the problem of predestination.

Hinduism, like most religions, postulates the existence of extra-terrestrial planes inhabited by beings that are able to help or hinder mortals in the attainment of their spiritual and material ends. The Hindu scheme of existence, though, is particularly complex, and differs fundamentally from our Semitic traditions, for

1) These 'definitions' are loosely adapted from Blackwood and Herman, op.cit., pp.357-8; but without the emphasis on complete and unalterable pre-determination. However appropriate this emphasis may be in philosophical discourse, it is not particularly relevant or useful in a consideration of the more popular views of predestination and fate to be found in the Sanskrit Epic literature.

there are many different planes and categories of divine beings.¹ It follows that the ability of divine beings to bestow on man his fate, or simply to meddle in human affairs, differs with their position in the order of creation. Therefore, before we can assess the nature and degree of divine interference in human affairs, it is first necessary to give consideration to the nature of the Epic universe, and the position occupied in it by man and by divine beings.

At no stage, however, is there a uniform or well-established cosmogony in the Hindu tradition, such as may be found for instance in the first chapter of Genesis.² While there is greater uniformity in the *Mahābhārata* than in the Vedic period, it is still quite impossible to reduce the variety of opinion on the origin of the world to be found in the *Mahābhārata* to one ordered scheme. Fortunately it is not necessary for our purposes to solve all the complexities of Epic cosmogony,³ let alone cosmology;⁴ what is important is to bring out the principal characteristics of the Hindu view of creation.

Epic cosmogonic myths do not normally begin at the absolute beginning for they take for granted the prior existence of some original element or first principle, be this impersonal or personal.⁵ From this first principle the universe comes forth by a variety of possible means: a process of natural evolution, self-generation,

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- 1) As one puzzled early European remarked of India: 'Here there are more gods than men.' Cited in W.D. O'Flaherty, 'Hinduism' in R. Cavendish (ed.), Mythology: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia, p.14
 - 2) H. Jacobi, 'Cosmogony and Cosmology (Indian)' in R. Hastings (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. 4, pp.155-60; and J. Muir, Original Sanskrit Texts, vol.4, pp.3-62.
 - 3) As Hopkins comments on Dakṣa's convoluted parentage and his numerous wives and progeny: 'If one believes in the unity of the epic one has a pretty task here.' E.W. Hopkins, Epic Mythology, p.190
 - 4) 'Indian cosmology has not been a popular subject, even with modern Indologists. It does not lead anywhere. ... But the most discouraging feature of traditional Indian cosmology is not its fantastic and uncritical character, but its complexity.' See R.F. Gombrich, 'Ancient Indian Cosmology' in C. Blacker and M. Loewe (eds.), Ancient Cosmologies, p.110.
 - 5) F.B.J. Kuiper, 'The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion', History of Religions, vol.15 (1975), p.109. On the origins of this the words of the *R̥g Veda* (10.129.7) remain true throughout: 'Whence this creation has arisen - perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not - the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows - or perhaps he does not know.' W.D. O'Flaherty (trans.), The R̥g Veda: An Anthology, pp.25-26.

primeval sacrifice, direct creation by a god or demiurge, or a mixture of these. Now, for the process of evolution to take place, there was no necessary requirement for a personal creator at all; and in the philosophical sections of the *Mahābhārata* - especially the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* sections - the triple world does evolve from a state of primordial unity (i.e. *prakṛti*) through its own inner dynamic. However, the purely philosophical theories of creation need not concern us here for they are little concerned with the evolution of the Hindu pantheon or the doings of the Hindu world of *pravṛtti*. We shall see, though, that various mythological accounts of creation have been influenced by the philosophical approach.

For the most part, in the *Mahābhārata*'s cosmogonic myths it is simply assumed that a supreme divine agent (or agents) is necessary at some stage for the full emergence of the triple world, with the responsibility normally being attributed to Brahmā, or Viṣṇu, and less often to Śiva. In the fully developed Hindu tradition, the three great gods are supposed to form a trinity, with Brahmā the creator, Viṣṇu the preserver, and Śiva the destroyer. At best this arrangement was theoretical, for the sectarian followers of each of the gods came to believe that their chosen deity fulfilled all three functions. The existence of the other two gods is not normally denied, but their position of subordination is made demeaningly obvious.¹ Over time the real loser was Brahmā who, as the personified form of the universal world power *brahman*, was vaguer and less appealing to popular imagination than his principal rivals.² However, in Epic cosmology Brahmā still occupies a position of importance. Many of the *Mahābhārata*'s creation myths recall an earlier time when Brahmā was at once creator, preserver and destroyer, thus combining in himself the functions later

1) In one Vaiṣṇavite myth, for instance, it is said that Brahmā was born of Nārāyaṇa's grace (*prasādaḥ*), whereas Rudra arose from his anger (*krodhasambhavaḥ*). Then the two gods perform creation and destruction in accordance with the instructions (*ādeṣita*) of Viṣṇu. They are merely instruments (*nimittamātram*). (Çāntiparvan, 328. 12-17) Elsewhere Śiva is even said to be Brahmā's son (*putraḥ*) for he was born from Brahmā's forehead (*lalāṭāprabhavaḥ*). (Çāntiparvan, 338.11-13).

2) Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p.189

appropriated by Viṣṇu and Īiva.¹

In the *Āntiparvan*, it is related how in the beginning there was nothing but an immeasurable watery waste, completely silent and covered in darkness. In time Brahmā, or the Grandfather as he is here called, was born from this undifferentiated primordial unity; and he proceeded to create the temporal and spatial dimensions of the triple world. Brahmā created air, fire, sun, the sky, the heavens, the underworld, the earth, the quarters, the year, the seasons, the months, and so on. Then, taking on a corporeal body (*ṣarīraṃ lokasthaṃ sthāpayitvā*), Brahmā begot sons of great energy (*uttamatejasah*). Brahmā's sons were the ṛṣis and brahmins Marīci, Atri, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Vasiṣṭha, Aṅgiras and Prācetas, as well as the powerful god Lord Rudra. Now Prācetas had a son called Dakṣa who begot sixty daughters, and all the brahmin ṛṣis accepted them for the sake of begetting offspring. In turn, from these offspring the whole universe of mobile and immobile creatures arose, including the gods, the ancestors, *gandharvas*, *apsarās*, *rakṣasas*, birds, animals, fishes, snakes and so on.²

Then Brahmā, the Grandfather of all the worlds, declared to his creatures the eternal teachings of the *Vedas* (*ṣāṣvataṃ vedapaṭhitam*). The *dharma* that he proclaimed was accepted by the gods (the Ādityas, Vasus, Rudras etc.) and the great ṛṣis (Bhṛgu, Atri, Aṅgiras, the Siddhas, Kāṣyapa, Vasiṣṭha, Gautama, Agastya, Nārada, etc.). However, the *dānavas* (Hiranyakaṣipu, Hiranyākṣa, Virocana, Āmbara, Vipracitti, Prahvāda, Namuci, Bali, and so on) chose to disregard the instruction of the Grandfather (*pitāmahaṣāsanam*). Filled with anger and greed (*krodhalobhasamanvitāḥ*) they worked for the destruction of the *dharma* (*dharmasyāpacayaṃ cakruḥ*). Resolved on *adharma* (*adharmaniṣcayāḥ*), they transgressed all the barriers of *dharma*, and enjoyed themselves (*dharmasetumatikramya remire*). Considering themselves equal in birth with the gods, they vied with them and the ṛṣis. And, through pride (*darpaḍ*)

1) For a recent analysis of Brahmā's earlier importance and subsequent decline, see G. Bailey, *The Mythology of Brahmā*.

2) *Āntiparvan*, 160, 11-20.

they showed no compassion for or attachment to other creatures (*na priyaṃ nāpyanukroṣaṃ cakrurbhūteṣu*) in the triple-world. With the force of their arms, they harassed all creatures (*daṇḍena rurudhuḥ prajāḥ*).¹ So, for the welfare of his creation, Brahmā celebrated a great sacrifice; and from the sacrifice issued a fearsome and terrible figure called *asī* or sword. Brahmā gave the sword to Rudra who commenced a great slaughter of the demons.

In this myth Brahmā is undoubtedly the supreme God, the first born from the primeval waters. His role is not really that of a creator in the Old Testament sense of the word, where God creates the world *ex nihilo* or out of nothing. Instead Brahmā starts the process of the differentiation of the primal undifferentiated unity, producing the essential contrasts which constitute the evolved phenomenal world - heaven, earth, the netherworld, the quarters, light and dark, male and female etc. In particular, once started by Brahmā the production of the full array of diverse creatures seems to be a self-sustaining and naturally evolving process. With Brahmā as the starting point, this evolution of creatures occurs in an hierarchical fashion, the direction of which is ever downward and outward. Although it might be expected that the lesser gods would be created first, this is not so. Instead Brahmā first produces the Seven Rṣis, and the god Rudra (Śiva), who is very much a subordinate deity here. As we shall see, though like gods, these *rṣis* are nonetheless not immortals. They are the singers of old who 'saw' the *Vedas*, and they are the ancestors of mortal men. In many respects they are intermediate between gods and men.² These mortal seers then act as demiurges begetting all creatures on the extra-fertile daughters of Dakṣa. Therefore, the lesser gods, demons, and all other divine and semi-divine creatures are ultimately the progeny of the mortal seers. However no detailed genealogy is provided.

But the creatures produced are characterised by contrasts in their natures. And when Brahmā lays down the *dharma* - which in this context seems to be a set of

1) *Ibid.*, 160.21-30.

2) See below, pp.312-39; and Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p.178.

injunctions for the ordered functioning of the triple-world - these contrasting natures come to the fore. Gods and men choose the course of *dharma* and order; while the demons choose the way of *adharma* and disorder. Admittedly, there is some justification for the demons' feelings of anger and hurt pride, for their claim to equal birth is quite justified given their position on the scale of evolution. But their claim with the gods cannot be allowed to stand for their demonic nature makes them favour *adharma* and disorder, and thus they endanger the ordered functioning of the triple-world and the welfare of its creatures. Brahmā therefore intervenes to ensure the maintenance of *dharma*, which must prevail for the preservation of the triple-world. In other words, Brahmā's creation is not just hierarchical, it is also inherently unstable: instability is built into its very core.¹

In the *Ādiparvan*, there are to be found two further cosmogonic myths in which Brahmā is undeniably the supreme God. The first is little more than a quick summary, while the second is probably the longest in the entire Epic. At the very beginning of the *Ādiparvan* Ugraśravas recounts that when darkness alone covered all there was found one great Egg (*brhadanḍamabhūdekam*), the imperishable seed of creatures (*prajānām bījamakṣayam*). This Egg rested on the eternal *brahman* (*brahma sanātanam*); and at the beginning of the *Yuga* it constituted the great divine cause (*nimittam ... mahaddivya*). The first being born (*ajāne*) from the Egg was the Grandfather (*pitāmaho*), the sole Lord Prajāpati (*prabhurekaḥ prajāpatiḥ*) and teacher of the gods (*suraguruḥ*), also known as Brahmā. Thereafter creation seemingly proceeded less from the direct activity of Brahmā himself, or some appointed demiurge, than through a

1) Compare the ancient tradition (*itihāsam purāṇanam*) concerning the instruction of the snakes, the gods, the *ṛsis* and demons by Prajāpati, the Lord of Creatures. Seated around Prajāpati they ask what would be to their benefit (*çreyo naḥ*). The Lord of Creatures merely uttered the sacred sound *AUM*, which is *brahman* in one syllable (*ekākṣaram brahman*). Now the snakes interpreted *AUM* as biting (presumably by noting the movement of the lips), the gods as *dāna* or giving gifts, the *ṛsis* as *dama* or self-restraint, and the demons as *dambha* or pride. Thus, though they received the same instruction, they all interpreted it differently and chose different dispositions. However, the inherent assumption would seem to be that their choice was bound by the natures with which they had been created. See *Āçvamedhikaparvan*, 26.6-11.

process of self-generation from the imperishable seeds of the primordial Egg. Presumably the seeds within the Egg constitute the developed triple-world in potential form. The 'birth' of Brahmā is the first step in the world of potentiality becoming the world of reality.

Thus, after the birth of Brahmā, there came forth Dakṣa and the seven sons of Dakṣa, and then arose the twenty-one Lords of Creatures (*prajānām patayaḥ*). Thereafter the assorted gods - the Viṣve Devas, the Ādityas, the Vasus, the Aṣvins - as well as the *yakṣas*, *sādhya*s, *piṣācas*, *guhya*kas, ancestors, brahmins, and royal seers arose (*prasūtāḥ*). All told 33 thousand, 33 hundred and 33 gods came into being. As well, the spatial and temporal dimensions - heaven, earth, atmosphere, space, the year, the months, the seasons and so on - all came forth. The various lineages of mortal men - the Kurus, Yādus, Bharatas etc - and other creatures in all their variety arose from the numerous progeny of the Sun, Vivasvat.¹

After self-generation is complete, decay and destruction follow just as surely; for 'all this world is thrown together again when the destruction of the Yuga comes.'² And this cycle, like the seasons, proceeded without end: 'Thus, without beginning and without end, this Wheel (of Existence) rolls on in the world causing being and destruction - beginningless and endless.'³

A much fuller genealogical account quickly follows in the *Ādiparvan* when King Janamejaya asks to hear the origins (*sambhavam*) of all creatures. Vaiṣampāyana's account begins with Brahmā - whose origins are not mentioned - who had six sons, the great ṛṣis Marīci, Atri, Aṅgiras, Pulastya, Pulaha and Kratu. Instead of the more normal means of procreation, all were born from Brahmā's mind (*mānasāḥ*), presumably the idea being that he simply willed them into existence. Now, Marīci begot a son Kaṣyapa (who is here identified with Dakṣa⁴), who in turn begot thirteen daughters,

1) *Ādiparvan*, 1.27-45.

2) *Punaḥ saṃkṣipyate sarvaṃ jagatprāpte yugakṣaye*// *ibid.*, 1.36.

3) *Evametadanādyantaṃ bhūtasamhāraṅkarakam/*

Anādinidhanaṃ loke cakram saṃparivartate// *ibid.*, 1.38.

4) cf. *Ibid.*, 60.33.

Aditi, Diti, Dānu, Kālā, Anāyus, Siṃhikā, Muni, Krodhā, Prāvā, Ariṣṭā, Vinatā, Kapilā and Kadrū; and 'from them arose powerful sons and grandsons without end.'

From Aditi were born the twelve Ādityas who were lords of the world (*bhuvaneṣvarāḥ*) – Dhātṛ, Mitra, Aryaman, Indra, Varuṇa, Aṅga, Bhaga, Vivasvat, Pūṣan, Savitṛ, Tvaṣṭṛ and Viṣṇu. However, to save the last-named from too inferior a birth, a probably later Vaiṣṇavite bard has added the qualifier that Viṣṇu exceeded all the other Ādityas in excellence.

From Diti there was only one son, the *daitya* Hiranyakaśipu; and he had five great-souled sons – Prahrāda, Saṃhrāda, Anuhrāda, Çibi and Bāṣkala. Prahrāda begot three sons, Virocana, Kumbha, and Nikumbha. Virocana had only one son, the splendid (*pratāpavān*) Bali; and his son was the great *asura* Bāṇa. From Dānu were born forty sons, all *dānavas*. The first was the renowned King Vipracitti and there followed such notable *dānavas* as Çambara, Namuci, Puloman and so on. Their sons and grandsons were innumerable (*asaṃkhyeyāḥ*).

Siṃhikā gave birth to the *asura* Rāhu, the foe of the sun and the moon; and from Krūrā were born endless sons and grandsons named Krodhavaças ('power of anger'), who were of cruel deeds and crushers of their enemies (*krūrakarmārimardanaḥ*). From Anāyus were born four *asura* sons, Vikṣara, Bala, Vīra and Vṛtra; and from Kālā were born the Kāleyas who, like Time itself, were powerful and destructive *dānavas*. As well, Vinatā gave birth to birds, Kādrū to snakes, Muni to various great *gandharvas*, and Prāvā to the race of *apsarās*, and to more *gandharvas* (although this is also attributed to Kapilā).²

But then, with scarcely a thought for consistency, Vaiṣampāyana relates what might be considered as additional detail; or as a separate, if more confused, creation genealogy. This account repeats the same list of Brahmā's six mind-born sons, and then adds that from Pulastya came the *rākṣasas*, the apes and *kiṃnara*; and

1) Etāsāṃ vīryasampannaṃ putrapautramanantakam/ *ibid.*, 59.13.

2) *Ibid.*, 59.7-50.

from Pulaha came the deer, lions, tigers and *kimpuruṣas*. However, according to this account Brahmā had three further sons: Prajāpati who begot the eight Vasu gods; and Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ. One of Prajāpati's sons, called Dhruva, begot the Lord Time who drives on the world (*bhagavānkālo lokaparakālanah*). And Dakṣa, it is now related, was born from the right thumb of Brahmā, and his wife from Brahmā's left thumb; and on her the sage begot not thirteen daughters but fifty, ten of whom he gave to Dharma, twenty-seven to Heaven, and thirteen to Kaṣyapa. The origins of Dharma, here personified, were also of a rather exceptional kind. He emerged from the body of Brahmā by breaking open the God's right breast.¹

The genealogy of mankind is not directly detailed here, although born they certainly are, and faulted at that. According to the text: 'Adharma, the destroyer of all beings, was born there from the creatures who, desirous of food, began devouring each other.'²

Adharma's wife was Nirṛti ('Destruction') for which reason the *rākṣasas* were known as Nairṛtas. And Nirṛti gave birth to three terrible sons who always delighted in evil deeds (*pāpakarmaratāḥ sadā*), Fear (*bhayo*), Great Danger (*mahābhayas*) and Death (*mṛtyus*).³

However, a little further on in the *Ādiparvan*, Vaiṣampāyana relates that Dakṣa, desiring to create, made (*abhisamdadhe*) fifty daughters, ten of whom he gave to Dharma, thirteen to Kaṣyapa, and twenty-seven to the Moon. Upon the choicest of his thirteen wives, Kaṣyapa begot the Ādityas, Indra, and the other gods, including Vivasvat. Vivasvat begot Yama Vaivasvata, the god of death. Yama begot Mārtaṇḍa, and the wise Manu was born his son; and from Manu were born men - the brahmins, *kṣatriyas* and so on.⁴

This detailed genealogy reinforces what the earlier creation myths suggest:

1) *Ibid.*, 60.1-49.

2) *Prajānāmannakāmānāmanyonyaparibhakṣaṇāt*/

Adharmastatra saṃjātaḥ sarvabhūtavinaṣaṇaḥ// *ibid.*, 60.52.

3) *Ibid.*, 60.52-3.

4) *Ibid.*, 70.7-13.

'creation' proceeds outward from a central point through a series of hierarchical steps. The detail, though, highlights another important characteristic: all creatures ^{descendants} in the triple-world are ultimately ancestors of Brahmā, and to one degree or another are interrelated. In particular, gods, demons, *rākṣasas* and snakes are all ultimately half-brothers; and their interminable feuds thus have a family ring to them. And again man, as represented by the *ṛṣis*, occupies a position of importance in the evolution of the triple-world. However, in this myth a new element of instability is introduced into the ordered functioning of the triple-world. Besides the adharmic preferences of demons and *rākṣasas*, Brahmā's creation of men is faulted for they are born afflicted by hunger. In the Hindu tradition there is nothing more disruptive of social order than hunger. In this instance, creatures attempt to sate their hunger by devouring each other, and from this act Adharma (not surprisingly) is born.

Man, or at least Manu, the progenitor of man, occupies an even more important position in another creation myth of a quite different form. In this myth Manu is now the son not of Mārtaṇḍa but of Vivasvat, who is here called a great seer. Now Manu practised awesome *tapas* (*so atapyata tapo ghoram*) for 10,000 years. While so engaged on the bank of the river *Vīriṇī*, a tiny fish swam up to him and prayed for his protection from the big fish, for the stronger fish always consume the weaker. Manu was filled with compassion and cared for the fish as a son. He first placed it in a small water-jar, and then as it grew larger he placed it in a pond and then the *Gaṅgā*. And as the fish continued to grow Manu pulled the now huge creature from the *Gaṅgā* into the ocean. This done, the great fish warned Manu that the time had come for the destruction of the world (lit. 'washing away' *saṃprakṣālanakālo ... lokānām*); and thus a huge flood would destroy everything standing or moving. The fish instructed Manu to build a sturdy ark (*nauṣṭha ... drdhā*) and to embark on it with the Seven *Ṛṣis* and 'all the seeds (of creatures) mentioned by me before.' In

1) *Bījāni caiva sarvāṇi yathoktāni mayā purā/ Āraṇyakaparvan, 185.30.*

time the destructive flood came, and the great fish came to Manu and towed the ark across the turbulent ocean for many years, until the ark was moored to the highest peak of the Himālayas. Thus did Manu, the progenitor of mankind, and the Seven Ṛṣis alone in the triple-world survive the great destructive flood. Then the fish addressed Manu and the Seven Ṛṣis: 'I am Brahmā, the Lord of Creatures: there is nothing found superior to me.' Thereupon Brahmā, rather than do the job himself, bade Manu to be his creative demiurge: 'By Manu, all creatures, gods, asuras, and men are to be created, and all the worlds, that which moves and moves not. ... And through my grace he will make no error in creating creatures.'² And so, engaging in mighty *tapas* (*tapasā mahatā yuktaḥ*) Manu began to create all creatures.³

In this myth the destruction of the triple world, divine beings and all, is brought about by water. All are quite literally washed away. Renewal, though, is effected through the medium of Brahmā who preserves Manu, the Seven Ṛṣis, and the 'seeds' of all creatures. In this instance, the ark is the equivalent of the primordial Egg, containing within it in potential form all creatures of the triple-world. However, in the subsequent renewal of the triple-world, Brahmā largely abrogates his creative role and delegates responsibility to his demiurge Manu. And it falls to Manu to renew not just men, but even gods and *asuras*.

In all these myths Brahmā is undeniably the supreme God, and principal agent for the renewal of the triple-world. However, while the *Mahābhārata* is not ultimately a sectarian text, sectarian influences are strong in parts; and in other Epic creation myths primacy is attributed to one or other of the great sectarian gods, especially Viṣṇu.

The principal two Vaiṣṇavite creation myths in the *Mahābhārata* are to be found in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* and *Çāntīparvan*. In the first myth Yudhiṣṭhira asks the

1) Ahaṃ prajāpatiḥbrahmā matparaṃ nādhigamyate/ *ibid.*, 185.48.

2) Manunā ca prajāḥ sarvāḥ sadevāsuraṃānavāḥ/
Sraṣṭavyāḥ sarvalokāḥca yacceṅgaṃ yacca neṅgati//
Matprasādātprajāsarge na ca moḥaṃ gamiṣyati// *ibid.*, 185.49-50.

3) *Ibid.*, 185.1-52.

great hermit Mārkaṇḍeya about the dissolution and creation of the triple-world; for, as Yudhiṣṭhira observes, through the grace of Parameṣṭhīn (i.e. Brahmā), Mārkaṇḍeya alone amongst gods, demons and snakes and other creatures was free of death. Therefore, when the triple-world was reduced to nothing but ocean, and while Brahmā, Lord of all Creatures (*sarvabhūteṣaṃ*) lay asleep on the lotus, Mārkaṇḍeya alone survived.

Mārkaṇḍeya agrees to recount the creation and dissolution which he repeatedly sees. But while Yudhiṣṭhira had spoken only of Brahmā, Mārkaṇḍeya begins by honouring Janārdana or Viṣṇu as the supreme being who is self-existent (*svayaṃbhūve*), eternal and imperishable (*ṣāṣvatāyāvyaṃyāya*), and who is the creator and transformer (*kartā vikartā ca*) of all existence.¹

First of all, Mārkaṇḍeya explains the cyclical nature of time and the theory of the four *yugas*. In the beginning there is the *Kṛta* age which lasts 4,800 years, followed by the *Tretā* for 3,600 years, *Dvāpara* for 2,400 years and *Kali* for 1,200 years. Together these four ages comprise one *yuga* of 12,000 years. At the end of a *yuga*, people, life and nature degenerate, the population increases and morality and religious observances decline dramatically. All men speak untruth; there is intermixture of castes; proper religious observances are abandoned; barbarian kings rule the earth; people become short-lived and feeble; respect for brahmins lapses; the population increases; women abandon all morals and have oral intercourse; cows yield little milk and trees little fruit; brahmins, afflicted by greed and folly, plunder the earth for alms; householders, burdened by taxes, become thieves; hermitages are abandoned, and Vedic students take to drink and pursue their guru's wives; Indra does not rain and the seeds do not grow; the *dharma* diminishes, and *adharma* increases; the *dharma*-minded decline, and evil prospers; women deceive their husbands, and fornicate with slaves and cattle.² However, this process of decline occurs over and over again, for a thousand *yugas* constitutes a Day of Brahmā.³

1) *Ibid.*, 186.1-16.

2) *Ibid.*, 186.17-55.

3) *Ibid.*, 186.23.

At the close of the thousand *yugas*, there befalls a great drought for many years which drives most creatures to their death. The earth is scorched by seven suns. Then fire, with a driving wind, burns up the already scorched universe, including gods, *asuras*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, snakes, *rākṣasas* and so on. Thereafter immense clouds gather and flood the burnt out earth until all is covered by one vast ocean. In this myth, then, the end of the earth is due to both flood and fire.

In this vast watery waste the only thing that moves, it seems, is Mārkaṇḍeya. Greatly bewildered, he roams the desolation without finding a resting place, until one day he sees in the ocean a great banyan tree. And, to his astonishment, on a branch of that tree he sees a child (*bālāṃ*). The child greets the tired Mārkaṇḍeya and bids him: 'Entering my inner body, O best of sages, you must rest, sir; I shall make a resting place for you as a kindness.'¹ At these words Mārkaṇḍeya becomes disgusted at his long life and his human condition (*nirvedo jīvite dīrgha manuṣyātve*), and when suddenly the child opens its mouth, powerlessly (*avaṣo*) Mārkaṇḍeya is made to enter by an act of divine will.

And within this child Mārkaṇḍeya sees the entire universe, both moving and still, including the gods headed by Indra, the *gandharvas*, *apsarās*, *yakṣas* and seers, as well as the *daītyas*, *dānavas* and other enemies of the gods. Mārkaṇḍeya roams within this body for one hundred years, without finding an end to it. Then Mārkaṇḍeya is exhaled through the god's mouth. After taking the child's feet and bowing down to him the awed seer questions the child about this mystery.²

The child revealed itself as the supreme God Nārāyaṇa, whom not even the gods knew: 'I am called Nārāyaṇa, the eternal imperishable cause of existence, the creator and destroyer of all creatures, O best of brahmins.'³ And just as at the dissolution of the triple-world Nārāyaṇa contained within his form 'the seeds' for

1) Abhyantaram ṣarīram me praviṣya munisattama/
Āsava bho vihito vāsaḥ prasādaste kṛto mayā// *ibid.*, 186.89.
2) *ibid.*, 186.56-129.
3) Ahaṃ nārāyaṇo nāma prabhavaḥ ṣāṣvato avyayaḥ/
Vidhātā sarvabhūtānāṃ saṃhartā ca dvijottama// *ibid.*, 187.4.

the renewal of the triple-world, so after creation all forms in the triple-world continued to be identical with the form of Nārāyaṇa. Thus did the God explain: 'I am Viṣṇu, I am Brahmā, and I am Çakra, the lord of the gods; I am King Vaiçravaṇa; (and) Yamaḥ the lord of the dead. I am Çiva and Soma; and Kaçyapa and Prajāpati; I am the Placer and the Ordainer; and I am the sacrifice, O best of brahmins. Fire is my mouth; my feet are the earth; and the moon and sun are in my eyes; the sky and all the quarters are my body; the wind abides in my mind.'¹ And in this fashion Nārāyaṇa continued to identify himself with various aspects of creation, including its less noble parts: 'Know, O best (of brahmins), that desire, anger, joy and fear, and also delusion are all forms of mine.'² Presumably, though, these seeds of degeneration take plant only in the course of time, and especially in the fourth or *Kali* age. Initially, at least, virtue alone characterises the first men in the *Kṛta* age and vice is nowhere to be found.

Nārāyaṇa does at least recognise that his creation has many vices and dangerous creatures (demons, *rākṣasas* etc.) built into it. For, as he explains: 'Whenever, O noble one, there is diminution of the *dharma* (and) the ascendancy of *adharma*, then I create myself. When *daityas* devoted to harm, (who are) invincible to the chief of gods, and also terrible *rākṣasas*, spring up in this world, then I take birth in the houses of those of virtuous deeds. Entering a human body, I quell all.'³

However, despite all this Brahmā had not become entirely redundant; for just as

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- 1) Ahaṃ viṣṇurahaṃ brahmā çakraçcāhaṃ surādhipaḥ/
Ahaṃ vaiçravaṇo rājā yamaḥ pretādhipastathā//
Ahaṃ çivaçca somaçca kaçyapaçca prajāpatiḥ/
Ahaṃ dhātā vidhātā ca yajñaçcāhaṃ divijottama//
Agnirāsyam kṣitiḥ pādau candrādityau ca locane/
Sadiçam ca nabhaḥ kāyo vāyurmanasi me sthitaḥ// *ibid.*, 187.5-7.
 - 2) Kāmaṃ krodhaṃ ca harṣaṃ ca bhayaṃ mohaṃ tathaiva/
Mamaiva viddhi rūpāṇi sarvāṇyetāni sattama// *ibid.*, 187.20.
 - 3) Yadā yadā ca dharmasya glānirbhavati sattama/
Abhyutthānamadharmaṣya tadātmānaṃ sṛjāmyaham//
Daityā hiṃsānuraktāçca avadhyāḥ surasattamaḥ/
Rākṣasāçcāpi loke asmīnyadotpatsyanti dāruṇāḥ//
Tadāhaṃ samprasūyāmi grheṣu çubhakarmaṇām/
Praviṣṭo mānuṣaṃ dehaṃ sarvaṃ praçamayāmyaham// *ibid.*, 187.26-28.

Brahmā had used Manu and others as his creative demiurge, so did Nārāyaṇa use Brahmā in the same way. Nārāyaṇa therefore bade Mārkaṇḍeya to wander here happily until the Grandfather of all the worlds should awake and create space, earth, light, wind and water and all else in the world, standing and moving.¹

The other main Vaiṣṇavite creation myth devotes more attention to the evolution of the triple-world from a state of undifferentiated unity to full differentiation. However, the essential characteristics of the Vaiṣṇavite view of the evolution of the triple-world remain the same as those discussed above for the myths in which Brahmā is the supreme God.

In this myth, Brahmā is again reduced to the role of Viṣṇu's demiurge, although here Viṣṇu also takes a direct role in creation. The myth begins by describing how Viṣṇu lay upon the primordial ocean. Then a beautiful lotus emerged from his navel; and from that lotus Brahmā came forth lighting up all the directions. However, a great *asura* named Madhu, born before from the quality of ignorance (*tamasah pūrvajo jājñe*), arose. But Viṣṇu slew that dreadful *asura* of terrible deeds and terrible purpose (*ugrakarmāṇamugrām buddhiṃ*) in order to help Brahmā (*brahmaṇopacitiṃ kurvan*). Viṣṇu was thereafter known as Madhusūdana.²

Then Brahmā created sons from his mind (*śaśrje putrānmānasān*) with Dakṣa the first, followed by Marīci, Atri, Aṅgiras, Pulastya, Pulaha and Kratu. Now Marīci begot, again from his mind or will, a son named Kaṣyapa. Meanwhile Dakṣa begot thirteen daughters, the eldest of whom was Diti; and they were married to Kaṣyapa. Then Dakṣa begot ten more daughters whom he married to Dharma. On them Dharma fathered the gods called Vasus, Rudras, Viṣvedevas, Sādhyas and Maruts. And Dakṣa begot twenty-seven more daughters who were all married to Soma.

Of Kaṣyapa's wives, Diti bore the *asuras* called *daityas*, and Danu bore the

1) Ākāṣaṃ pṛthivīm jyotirvāyūṃ salilameva ca/
 Loke yacca bhavaccheṣamiha sthāvarajaṅgamam// *ibid.*, 187.47.
 2) Çāntiparvan, 200.12-16.

asuras called *dānavas*, while Aditi gave birth to the *Ādityas*, the foremost of the gods. In turn, the foremost of the *Ādityas* is said to be Viṣṇu, although this no longer seems quite commensurate with his new found status as the great sectarian God. Through Viṣṇu's might (*vikramaṇād*) the prosperity of the gods increased and the *dānavas* were defeated. The other wives of Kaṣyapa gave birth to *gandharvas*, horses, birds, cows, *kimpuruṣas*, fishes and trees and plants.¹

However, Viṣṇu too played a major part in the creation of earth and its creatures, although the boundary between his activities and those of Kaṣyapa's wives is nowhere drawn. Thus it is related that the Destroyer of Madhu created the day and night, and the seasons, the clouds, and all the immobile and mobile objects (*sthāvara-jāṅgamān*); and he created the earth with all upon her (*prthivīm so asṛjadviṣvām sahitām*). However, the creation of men is explained in terms of a rather different cosmogonic idea - the primeval sacrifice of the original being.² Thus he created the four *varṇas* from the various appendages of his body: *brāhmins* from his mouth; *kṣatriyas* from his arms; *vaiṣyas* from his thighs; and *çūdras* from his feet. Having created the four *varṇas*, he made Dhātṛ the lord and ruler of all beings.³

In this Vaiṣṇavite myth, too, the forces of disorder and degeneration were again inherent in Viṣṇu's creation; but it was only with the passing of the ages that they came to the fore. Unlike some of Brahmā's creations, men were not created afflicted by immediate hunger, anger and desire, but were born to a state of benighted innocence. In the first of the four ages of Time, men lived as long as they chose and had no fear of Yama; offspring were begotten by will (*saṃkalpād ... udapadyata*) and not by sexual intercourse. In the *Tretā* age, too, creatures were begotten by

1) *Ibid.*, 200.17-25.

2) The idea goes back to the famous *Puruṣasūkta* hymn, *R̥gveda* x.90, which recurs with variations in *Atharvaveda* xix.6, the *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* xxxi and the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* iii.12. See J. Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts*, vol.1, pp.7-16; W. Norman Brown, 'The Sources and Nature of "pūruṣa" in the *Puruṣasūkta* (*R̥g Veda*, 10.90)' in *India and Indology*, pp.5-10.

3) *Adhyakṣaṃ sarvabhūtānāṃ dhātāramakarotprabhuḥ*// *Çāntiparvan*, 200.33.

will, for the practice of sexual intercourse did not originate until the third or *Dvāpara* age. In the fourth and final age, that of *Kali*, mortals came to live in pairs (*dvaṇḍvamāpedire*) or to marry. And the inference is that with sexual intercourse and pairing there arose death. As sexual innocence declined, so did evil behaviour increase. In the *Kṛta* age doers of evil (*pāpakṛtas*) did not live on earth; it was from the *Tretā* age onwards that such beings were present. Then from the juncture of the *Tretā* and the *Dvāpara* ages the *kṣatriyas* began to fight each other.¹

Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, it is *Ṣiva* who is praised as the supreme creator, preserver and destroyer.² There are, however, no unqualified *Ṣaivate* creation myths in the *Mahābhārata*. In the two creation myths in which *Ṣiva* does play a major part, his supremacy is unclear and his role ambiguous.

The first myth is related by *Kṛṣṇa* when *Yudhiṣṭhira* asks how *Açvatthāman* was capable of destroying the entire victorious *Pāṇḍava* camp in the night-time raid. *Kṛṣṇa* explains that *Açvatthāman* had sought the help of *Mahādeva*, the eternal God of Gods (*īṣvareṣvaramavyayam*). For, *Kṛṣṇa* explained, *Ṣiva* 'was the beginning, the middle and the end of creatures, O *Bhārata*. And all this world acts through his activity alone.'³

Now, having established *Ṣiva*'s supremacy, *Kṛṣṇa* relates how the Grandfather, desiring to create beings, saw that Original God (*prathamam vibhuḥ*) and said 'Create creatures immediately' (*bhūtāni sṛja mācīram*). *Ṣiva* said 'So be it', but having observed the faults of living beings (*bhūtānām doṣadarçivān*) that great ascetic (*mahātapāh*) plunged into the waters and practised *tapas* for a long time (*dīrghakālam tapastepe*). Now the Grandfather, after waiting a very long time, created from his mind another creator of all beings (*sraṣṭāram sarvabhūtānām*). This unnamed being then created seven lords of creatures (*prajāpatiṇ*) with *Dakṣa* as their first. *Dakṣa* then produced the multitudes of four-fold creatures (*bhūtagrāmaṃ*

1) *Ibid.*, 200.34-43.

2) e.g. *Droṇaparvan*, 172.55-72, 173.9-11, *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 15.30-44, 16.14-75.

3) *Ādīreṣa hi bhūtānām madhyamantaṣṭa bhārata/*

Viceṣṭate jagaccedaṃ sarvamasyaiva karmaṇā// Sautikaparvan, 17.9.

caturvidham).¹

However, as soon as created, all these creatures were afflicted by hunger and at once ran towards the creator that Brahmā had produced, desirous of devouring him (*bibhakṣayiṣavo*). Their creator fled to the Grandfather, and said: 'Blessed One, protect me from them; give them sustenance.'² Then the Grandfather gave them herbs and plants as food, and to strong creatures he gave the weaker as food. With their means of sustenance procured, these creatures went forth and happily multiplied, and Brahmā was well-pleased. But then the First Born (*jyeṣṭhaḥ*) rose from the water and saw all these creatures. Rudra now became angry (*cukrodha*), severed his own generative organ (*liṅgaṃ svaṃ cāpyavidhyata*), and cast it into the earth (*tatpraviddham tadā bhūmau*). When Brahmā asked why, Īśa wrathfully (*saṃrambhas*) replied: 'These creatures were created by another; what am I to do with this (*liṅgaṃ*). Grandfather! with my *tapas* I had obtained food for the sake of creatures.'³ Angry and despondent, Īśa then went away to practise *tapas* (*tapastaptum*) at the foot of Mt Muñjavat.⁴

In this account, Īśa is initially lauded as the great God; and realising the faults of creatures he undertakes *tapas* to create creatures free of defect. But his creative efforts are thwarted by an impatient Brahmā; and significantly the creatures produced by Brahmā's other demiurges are faulted. They are afflicted by hunger, that great destroyer of *dharma*; and in striking imagery they attempt to devour their creator. Order and *dharma* is only preserved when Brahmā hastily ordains for them their means of sustenance. Although, or so it would seem, the food Brahmā allocates had been produced by Īśa for the creatures he was intent on creating. And Īśa's ill-humour over the whole affair may perhaps help to explain his at times ambiguous attitude towards the triple-world.

1) *Ibid.*, 17.6-15.

2) *Ābhyo māṃ bhagavānpātu vṛttirāśaṃ vidhīyatām*// *ibid.*, 17.17.

3) *Prajāḥ sṛṣṭāḥ pareṇmāḥ kiṃ kariṣyāmyanena vai*// *ibid.*, 17.24.

4) *Ibid.*, 17.6-26.

The second creation myth concerning Īiva occurs in the *Anuṣāsanaparvan* where the great seer Vasiṣṭha relates the conduct of the Grandfather Brahmā, the Supreme Soul (*paramātmānaḥ*) at a sacrifice held by the great God (*devasya mahatas*) Lord Rudra. The sacrifice was attended by all the gods, headed by Agni, and the ascetics; as well as by the *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas*, and the sacrificial instruments in their personified form. Also present were the wives, daughters and mothers of the celestials. All there were pleased at the sacrifice of Paçupati, but at the sight of the celestial ladies Brahmā lost all sense of self-control and produced living creatures in the process:

Seeing them, the Self-Born (Brahmā's) semen fell on the ground. Because it was still, Puṣan with his hands picked up from the ground the dust with the semen and cast it into the sacrificial fire. Then the sacrificial session proceeded with flames blazing; (but) from Brahmā pouring libations there, his passions were (again) aroused. And as soon as his semen came out, he took it up with the sacrificial ladle; and also, O joy of the Bhrgus, he sacrificed it along with clarified butter and the recitation of mantras. From that the virile Brahmā caused the multitudes of creatures to arise; and thus from his fiery energy, vitality was generated in (all) beings. From darkness (arose) beings of darkness; (but), also, goodness pervaded both, (just as) the sky, although in darkness, is always imbued with the quality of light. So goodness, energy and darkness are in all beings.¹

The myth then relates the birth from the component parts of the sacrificial fire of the principal ṛṣis, Bhrgu, Aṅgiras, Kavi, Marīci, Atri, the Vālakhilyas, the Vaikhānasas, and the lesser ṛṣis; as well as assorted groups of gods, the Aṇvins, the Lords of Creation (*prajāpatis*) the Rudras, Maitradevatas and the Vasus. Desire (*chandas*) also arose from the sweat of Agni (i.e. the sacrificial fire), mind from his strength, and the units of Time from other component parts. After these births had taken place, Rudra claimed the offspring as his for it was his sacrifice; while Agni also claimed them for they had all originated from his limbs (*madaṅgebhyaḥ*). But Brahmā, too, claimed them for it was his seed that was poured upon the sacrificial

1) Svayaṃbhuvastu tā drṣtvā retāḥ samapatadbhuvi//
 Tasya çukrasya niṣpandātpāṇsūnsaṃgrhya bhūmitaḥ/
 Prāsyatpūṣā karābhyāṃ vai tasmīnneva hutāçane//
 Tatastasminsampravṛtte satre jvalitapāvake/
 Brahmano juhvatastatra prādurbhāvo babhūva ha//
 Skannamātram ca tacchukram sruveṇa pratigrhya saḥ/
 Ājyavanmantravaccāpi so ajuhodbhrgunandana//
 Tataḥ saṃjanayāmāsa bhūtagrāmaṃ sa vīryavān/
 Tatastu tejasastasmājjajñe lokeṣu taijasam//
 Tamasastāmasā bhāvā vyāpi sattvaṃ tathobhayaṃ/
 Saguṇastejaso nityaṃ tamasyākāçameva ca//
 Sarvabhūteṣvatha tathā sattvaṃ tejastathā tamaḥ/ Anuṣāsanaparvan, 85.8-14.

fire, and he who planted the seed should gain the fruit. Now, all the hosts of gods bowed down to Brahmā and accepted that birth was from him (*tavaiva prasavāḥ sarve*), but respectfully bade him grant the desire of Agni and Rudra. Therefore Brahmā gave Bṛghu to Rudra as his offspring; and gave Aṅgiras to Agni, while taking Kavi as his own offspring. Then Bṛghu, Aṅgiras and Kavi busied themselves with procreating all the peoples of the earth. Indeed, all mortals were to be the offspring of these three (*sarvaṃ saṃtānameteṣāṃ*).¹

In this myth creation comes about through the impregnation of the 'womb', i.e. the sacrifice, by Brahmā's semen; and this recalls two older theories of cosmogony. The first is the theory that the sacrifice (with which Prajāpati is often identified) is itself a womb giving 'rebirth' to the cosmos and all within. The second is the theory that creation occurred through an act of primeval incest or progenation.² Though Brahmā does not here commit incest, he still spills his seed at the mere sight of celestial women not allowed to him.

The myth is not entirely clear about who is the supreme God; although certainly Brahmā does emerge as the god most closely connected with the creation and functioning of the triple-world. This is possibly significant, for just as Brahmā - riven with desire and lust - proves to be faulted, so are similar faults built into what he creates. To explain this, the myth draws upon a crude *guṇa* theory, the implication being that all created creatures contain varying proportions of the qualities represented by the three *guṇas*, i.e. goodness, energy and darkness. As usual, having produced a faulted creation, Brahmā leaves much of the detailed creative work to others. In this case, responsibility for the procreation of mortals is vested in the three great *ṛṣis*, Bṛghu, Aṅgiras and Kavi.

To conclude, in Epic creation mythology complexities and inconsistencies abound;

1) *Ibid.*, 85.1-43.

2) See W. Kaelber, 'Tapas, Birth and Spiritual Rebirth in the Vedas', *History of Religions*, vol.15, (1976), pp.343-86; W.D. O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, pp.25-35.

and there is little purpose in trying to reconcile them for they cannot be reconciled. But, despite this, certain essential characteristics of the Hindu cosmos do emerge.

The first is its very hierarchical nature. In the Indian pantheon, there are many many divine beings, but in no sense are they of equal standing. Just as man in India is *Homo Hierarchicus* and not *Homo Aequalis*,¹ so may the same be said of the gods. At the top of the hierarchy there are three great gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Īiva, who are considered by their respective devotees to be eternal, imperishable and self-create. While in later Hindu literature Brahmā is a figure of limited importance, for much of the Epic Brahmā holds his own with the other two sectarian Gods. These three Gods deservedly stand alone for, to their devotees they are above or outside of the creation.

As we have seen, the triple-world that one or other of the great Gods repeatedly brings forth is created or unfolds in a progressive fashion. From the creative agent who begins the process, succeeding layers of creation expand downwards and outwards in a pyramidal fashion until the very lowest forms of life come into being. The result is that all creatures from the very great Gods to the lowest forms of life are linked in a great chain of being, with hierarchy its essential organising principle. It is important to note that man does not necessarily occupy the lowly position in this hierarchy that one might first expect, for it is the progenitors of mankind, the great seers or Manu, who are normally created first, and who are then often responsible for the creation of the old Vedic gods and other forms of life.

Another important characteristic is that the essential forms of life in the triple-world are interrelated, for ultimately all are progeny of the one parent, be this Brahmā, Viṣṇu, or Īiva. In particular, the Vedic gods, the demons, *rākṣasas* and *gandharvas* are actually half-brothers; and just as brothers with very different

1) See L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp.1-64.

natures may well compete, fall out and fight, then so do these cosmic creatures. Nonetheless, related and interconnected they remain.

A further characteristic of the greatest importance is the fragility of the created triple-world. Much as good, truth, virtue and so on are built into the creation by the great God, so too are hunger, evil and desire. Sometimes creation's faults manifest themselves immediately and in the starkest fashion as hungry creatures attempt to devour their creator. In other myths, these faults emerge slowly but inexorably with the passing of the ages of Time; for, once created, evil must emerge sooner or later. In the *Mahābhārata's* creation myths this mixed bag of virtues and vices seems to be accepted as the normal state of affairs, with no particular blame being attached to God. Indeed, the text all but assumes that differences, distinctions and contrasts are the very essence of the triple-world, without which creation would never have moved beyond the primal state of undifferentiated unity. Thus good, truth, virtue and order are only perceivable qualities if they exist in contrast with evil, untruth, non-virtue and chaos.¹ And gods are only distinguishable entities if they can be contrasted with demons and flesh-eating *rākṣasas*.² However, the contrasts are not those of black and white for these opposed categories are also interdependent in that you could not have one without the other. To this extent, the cosmic set-up parallels that of orthodox Hindu society where pure brahmins can only exist if there are impure untouchables.³

In only one myth is there the suggestion that creation is faulted and capable of rectification; but in this instance Īiva's good intentions come to nought through Brahmā's impatience. In one further myth there is the suggestion that God has no choice but to build certain distinctions and defects into his creation. In the *Mokṣadharmā*, Bhīṣma recounts a narrative by the ṛṣi Nārada concerning the origins

1) The idea is well put in Manu 1.26: 'Moreover, in order to distinguish actions, he separated merit (*dharma*) from demerit (*adharma*), and he caused the creatures to be effected by the pairs (of opposites), such as pain and pleasure.' G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, p.13 (Sanskrit terms added).

2) See W.D. O'Flaherty, *The Problem of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, pp.48-49.

3) See Dumont, *op.cit.*, pp.33-64.

of death. Nārada relates that at the time of the creation, the Grandfather created creatures who were not subject to the greatest of all faults for mortals - death. As none of them died, the number of creatures grew excessively, and soon all the universe was crowded with creatures, to the great distress of the goddess Earth who began to sink with the burden. Failing to find a way of destroying the excess population, Brahmā gave way to anger and flames came forth from his body which burnt all the quarters of the universe. However Ćiva, filled with compassion (*kāruṇyam*) at the plight of creatures, beseeched the boon that creatures should not be destroyed outright in anger, but should be subject to repeated birth and death. To this Brahmā agreed, and there came forth from all the appertures of his body a dark woman wearing garments of red with red eyes and palms, and adorned with divine earrings and ornaments. Brahmā then commanded her to go forth and slay all creatures. However, the Goddess of Death, shedding tears, beseeched and implored Brahmā to spare her such a terrible function. Despite Brahmā's repeated commands, Death disobediently chose to practise *tapas*. Ultimately Death only reluctantly agreed from fear of Brahmā's curse, and after Brahmā had assured her that there would be no sin for she would be assisted in her dread task by terrible diseases born of her tears and by Desire and Anger (*kāmakrodhasu*), which would afflict creatures when the time of their end came. So, in this instance, Brahmā does create a universe free of one of its most singular distinctions, life and death - only to find that the distinction was necessary for the overall order of creation.¹

Therefore disorder, whether in the form of demons, *rākṣasas*, hungry men or whatever, constantly threatens the ordered stability and very existence of the triple-world. In the Epic view, the order of the triple-world was at best a precarious balance between the powers of cosmos and chaos.

The great Gods, then, in their capacity as creators produce an hierarchical, interrelated, and interdependent but fragile creation. It is in their capacity as

1) See Ćāntiparvan, 248-250.

preservers that the awkward consequences have to be faced. If the triple-world is to prove a viable creation, rules are necessary; and the sum total of these rules constitutes one of the principal, if more difficult, concerns of the *Mahābhārata* - *dharma*. As Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira: 'The promulgation of *dharma* was for the strength of creatures. ... Because it upholds they call it *dharma*. (All) creatures are maintained through *dharma*.'

In the above myths we have already seen how *dharma* is the construction of the great Gods, and more especially Brahmā. Thus *dharma*, in personified form, is born from Brahmā's right breast; and Brahmā bestows *dharma* on his freshly created creatures by teaching them the *Vedas*.² Elsewhere, too, Brahmā is referred to as *dharmamaya*, 'he who consists of *dharma*', and *caturveda* 'he who is the four *Vedas*'.³ It is also related that Brahmā first created the Lords of Creation (*prajāpatiḥ*), who were brahmins, from his own *tejas*; and 'Then, for attaining Heaven, the Lord ordained truth, *dharma*, *tapas*, the eternal *Vedas*, good conduct and purity.'⁴

The term *dharma* cannot be adequately translated by any one word in English for through time it has come to be used in several widely different senses.⁵ The most general, and doubtlessly original, sense of the term is indicated by its root *dhṛ* which signifies maintaining, sustaining or supporting. Applied to the triple-world as a whole '*dharma* signifies the eternal laws which maintain the world.'

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- 1) Prabhāvārthāya bhūtānāṃ dharmapravacanāṃ kṛtam/
Dhāraṇāddharma ityāhurdharmena vidhṛtāḥ prajāḥ/ *ibid.*, 110.10-11.
 - 2) Traditionally *dharma* rests primarily and essentially upon revelation or *ṛuti*. And the Vedic texts are the principal revealed texts - 'divine words gathered directly by the inspired bards.' R. Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, p.7.
 - 3) *Çāntiparvan*, 175.34, and *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 194.12.
 - 4) Tataḥ satyaṃ ca dharmāṃ ca tapo brahma ca çāçvatam/
Ācāraṃ caiva çaucaṃ ca svargāya vidadhe prabhuḥ// (reference mislaid)
 - 5) Note that when Yudhiṣṭhira asks about *dharma*, Bhīṣma answers that 'It is very difficult to explain.' *duṣkaraḥ pratisaṃkhyātum* *Çāntiparvan*, 110.9. c.f. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmāçāstra*, vol.1, p.1.
 - 6) Lingat, *op.cit.*, p.3. Compare, too, Jeanine Miller's comments on *dharma* and *ṛta* during the Vedic period: 'The second law word, *dharmān*, from *dhṛ*, to buttress, support, which often governs *ṛta*, seems to have meant in Vedic times that which holds together through the inherent law of harmony, cohesion, that which

From this general sense, the domain of *dharma* is capable of almost unlimited expansion until it regulates or encompasses each and every aspect of the triple-world. At the cosmic level, *dharma* becomes the set of rules or injunctions which govern the network of relationships which should ideally exist between gods and demons, gods and men, and so on. Further, it is the set of rules which governs the conduct of the various groups of beings in the evolved triple-world. This means different things at different levels. For the great Gods, for instance, their *dharma* is the process of creation, preservation and destruction, which they repeatedly bring about for all the cycles of eternity.¹ At the level of mortal society, *dharma* increasingly became the set of rules that designated the required duty of a particular class (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*). For this reason it is normally called *varṇāśramadharmā*, although it may also differ according to such ~~such~~ factors as family and sex. The duties pertaining to these categories allows each individual to define his own individual *dharma*, in accordance with the status (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*) at which he stands. The totality of rules to which he must conform is his *svadharma*. And, it is important to note, what the individual should do - his *svadharma* - is that which in any case accords with his inherited nature. For instance, what a *śūdra* should do is that which his nature urges him to do. As codified in the *Dharmasūtras* and related texts, *varṇāśramadharmā* became a subject of

maintains the foundations of the law. *Dharman* is a more specialised aspect of *ṛta* and is used in the sense of specific statutes that sustain, regulate and order the course of the universe; the term *ṛta* referring to the whole, i.e. the cosmic and social order, the truth, the sacrificial rite, the term *dharman* to specific regulations binding under that whole. The fixed norms of cosmic order manifest themselves as the divine statutes which uphold the march of all things and maintain the universe in every aspect.' Miller, *op.cit.*, p.101.

1) R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p.104.

unending complexity.¹ It is mostly in this sense that the *Mahābhārata* considers the term *dharma*; and it is only to be expected that the *dharma* of mortals should be of most concern to our authors.

In the *Ṛg Veda*, at least, *ṛta* and *dharma* probably only applied to human beings and deities in the region of *sat*; with the demons dwelling below in the region of *asat* abhorring these standards.² However, the Epic and later Hindu world was to become much more thoroughly ethicised with notions of *dharma* and *svadharma*, and even *varṇa*, increasingly applied to other categories of being, including demonic groups. Again it is important to note that the *dharma* of each category of being in the triple-world is that which pertains to the nature of that category. What one should do (*svadharma*) is that which one's nature directs one to do. Thus it is the nature of snakes to bite, *rākṣasas* to eat human flesh and guzzle blood, demons to destroy, deceive and harm, gods to give and seers to restrain their senses; and so it is their *svadharma* to do so.³

Probably the idea of demonic *svadharma*'s would have seemed strange to Vedic man. Even stranger, though, must have seemed the later tendency, partly evident in the *Mahābhārata*, to attribute *varṇa* to gods, demons and *rākṣasas*. Thus there are references to brahmin demons such as Viçvarūpa and Vṛtra,⁴ and to brahmin *rākṣasas* who are considered particularly powerful.⁵ There is even a reference to intermixture of *varṇa*'s (*saṃkarās*) occurring amongst the demons after they began to fall away from virtue and *dharma* with the passage of time.⁶ During their forest exile Bhīma despatches a *rākṣasa* called Jaṭāsura, i.e. the *asura* with the ascetic braid;⁷ and there is also a reference to the *rākṣasa* demon Mārīca becoming an

1) See P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.1-6, vol.2, pp.1-3. Winternitz suggests the reason why this was so: 'Through these works (the *Dharmasūtras*) the Brahmins succeeded in transforming the Law of ancient India to their own advantage, and in making their influence felt in all directions.' M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol.1, p.275.

2) W. Norman Brown, 'Dīrghatamas's Vision of Creation', in *India and Indology*, p.61.

3) O'Flaherty, *The Problem of Evil ... op.cit.*, p.95.

4) e.g. Udyogaparvan, 10.42-43, 13.10-12.

5) Çalyaparvan, 42.16.

6) Çāntiparvan, 221.64.

7) Āraṇyakaparvan, 154.1 ff.

ascetic (*tāpasyam*).¹ On his tour of the *tīrthas*, Kṛṣṇa's elder brother Balarāma comes to the sacred spot called *Çaṅkha* where he beheld a gigantic tree where there dwelt *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, *piçācas*, and thousands of *siddhas*. Abstaining from other kinds of food, they ate only the fruit of that king of the forest at the proper time, in accordance with their vows and rules.² Amongst the gods, the *Ādityas* are said to be *kṣatriyas*, the *Maruts* are *vaiçyas*, while the *Açvins* are *çūdras*, and the gods honoured by the *Aṅgiras*' family are brahmins.³ However, the partial extension of the system of *varṇāçramadharmā* worked out for man to other categories of being could cause some peculiar complications, especially for *Indra* (a *kṣatriya* god himself⁴) when opposed to brahmin demons, who should be honoured as brahmins, but must be slain as demons.⁵

However, the complicated demands of *varṇāçramadharmā* are complicated even more by the recognition of a second level of *dharma*, generally called *sanātana* ('eternal') or *sāmānya* ('equal' or 'the same for everyone') *dharma*. O'Flaherty distinguishes them well:

Svadharmā is as complex as the caste system; absolute or eternal (*sanātana*) *dharma* is rather like the ten commandments - easily memorised, not so easily followed. Absolute *dharma* demands that all of us behave properly in certain general ways, in addition to the particular requirements of our social class and stage of life.⁶

While there is no common agreement amongst the texts on the precise requirements of absolute *dharma* there is nevertheless broad agreement. Explaining the general duties of the four *varṇas* in the *Çāntiparvan*, *Bhīṣma* tells *Yudhiṣṭhira*: 'Freedom from anger, truthfulness of speech, sharing, patience, procreation on one's wife, purity and friendliness, rectitude, and maintenance of dependents: these are the nine (duties) for all the *varṇas*.'⁷ The *Arthaçāstra*, which is at least contemporary with the *Mahābhārata*, lays down that all men must cultivate non-injury, truth, purity, good will, mercy and patience.⁸ For mortals, reconciling the demands of relative and absolute *dharma* cannot have been easy. A *cāṇḍālā* required by his *svadharmā* to slaughter animals would find it acutely difficult to observe the precepts of purity, rectitude and non-injury. It may well be because of these irreconcilable conflicts that the Epic bards also inflicted the demands of absolute *dharma* upon the principal participants in their spiritual world. Thus in the Epic we

1) *Ibid.*, 261.55. 2) *Çalyaparvan*, 36.20-22. 3) *Çāntiparvan*, 201.22-23.

4) *Ibid.*, 22.11. 5) See O'Flaherty, *The Problem of Evil ... op.cit.*, pp.104.

6) *Ibid.*, p.95. Also see P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.3-11.

7) *Akrodhaḥ satyavacanāḥ saṁvibhāgaḥ kṣamā tathā/
Prajanaḥ sveṣu dāreṣu çaucamadroha eva ca//
Ārjavaḥ bhṛtyabharanaḥ navaite sārva-varṇikāḥ/ Çāntiparvan*, 60.7-8.

8) *Arthaçāstra* 1.3.13 cited in O'Flaherty, *The Problem of Evil ... op.cit.*, p.95.

find frequent instances of demons adopting a virtuous life-style consistent with adherence to a code of absolute *dharma*. However, as O'Flaherty has so admirably demonstrated, here too the existence of relative and absolute *dharma* created contradictions that could not always be resolved. Particular difficulty attached to such precepts as non-injury, freedom from anger, patience and compassion, when the more demonic forms of creation tried to reconcile their *svadharma* to kill and be cruel with the eternal *dharma* to observe non-injury and mercy.¹

While the potential for contradictions in the Epic system of *dharma* was considerable, it nevertheless provided a system of rules through which order should prevail in God's creation. But *dharma* by no means guaranteed the ascendancy of order.

An obvious reason was that creatures did not always abide by the precepts of *dharma*. As well, weakness was built into the very system itself, for certain *svadharmanas* (of demons, *rākṣasas*, snakes and malevolent spirits), legitimate though they might be, ultimately promoted disorder and the rule of *adharma* in the triple-world; despite the fact that the triple-world demanded the prevalence of *dharma* for its ordered existence. Although it was legitimate - and indeed necessary and required - for the more demonic forms of creation to fulfill their *svadharmanas*, it was only legitimate within limits set by the need to maintain the primacy of order and *dharma*. If they proved too successful or determined in fulfilling their *svadharma*, the fragile rule of *dharma* would be threatened. In the *Mahābhārata*, *dharma* seems to be ever under threat; and, as we shall see, the intervention of one of the great Gods to restore the balance is constantly required. In terms of degree, if not quantity, it is in this way that the divine world makes the greatest impact on mortal affairs in the Epic.

By this stage, it should be apparent that the complexities of the Indian cosmos

1) See *ibid.*, chapter 5.

are merely a mirror image of those of orthodox Hindu society. Just as orthodox society is characterised by hierarchy, interdependence, and the fear of social disorder, so is the cosmos at large. The authors of our text have transposed onto the mysterious and crowded cosmos beyond, the essential characteristics of their own society. And just as the individual in orthodox society is a mere point in a complicated web of relationships, so is man as a species a mere point in a complicated web of cosmic relationships. Given this, it follows that the ability of divine or supernatural beings to meddle in human affairs is very considerable, although it will differ with their position on the hierarchy. However, from our point of view what matters is the point at which divine meddling becomes so pervasive and consistent that it may be considered as predetermining man's lot or bestowing upon man his fate.

At the lower level of the Indian chain of being are to be found a great multitude of supernatural beings and spirits, such as river and mountain divinities, sacred trees, divine animals, and assorted spirits (e.g. *rākṣasas*, *pretas*, *bhūtas*, *piṣācas*, demonic mothers), often of an ambiguous and dangerous nature. No doubt spiritual beings of this type have always existed in the Hindu scheme of things; and in the day to day lives of ordinary folk they may have been of more importance than the higher gods and great demons.¹ This importance, though, is not reflected in the formal literature of the Hindu high tradition.² In the *Mahābhārata*, these lower spiritual beings spring into view frequently enough, but only very occasionally do any of them play an individual part of any importance in the affairs of Epic man. Their position in the Epic is more that of background decoration; only occasionally do they even play a supporting role. When they do their effect may be beneficial or

1) See Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p.3.

2) For instance, though the demonic mothers who approach Skanda appear only briefly in the pages of the *Mahābhārata*, it is sufficient to make them seem a far more fearsome and chilling force than the volumes said about *rākṣasas*. Āraṇyakaparvan, 219.14-57. Also see D. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, pp.151-60.

harmful to mankind, but for us this is of little importance. What does matter is that the effect is only occasional and limited in scope and duration. In other words, the lower spiritual beings merely meddle; in no sense can they be considered as agents determining man's destiny. This can be illustrated by a brief look at two of the more prominent and successful of the Epic's lower spiritual beings - the goddess Gaṅgā, the personified form of the most important of the holy rivers, and the king of birds, Garuḍa.

The main contribution of the goddess Gaṅgā to the *Mahābhārata* is her assumption of human form - at the behest of the Vasus - and marriage to King Ṣaṁtanu, whose predilection for beautiful women starts the rot in the Bharata lineage, and sets the scene for the central plot of the Epic. This marriage between mortal and divine bears fruit in the form of Bhīṣma, the grandfather of the disputing Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, and a principal actor in the story-line of the Epic.¹ Thereafter the goddess makes the occasional appearance in the interests of her son: to mediate (unsuccessfully) between Bhīṣma and his guru, the great warrior brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya;² to drive Bhīṣma's chariot in the subsequent battle after her son had been grievously wounded and his charioteer slain;³ to try to dissuade (unsuccessfully) Ambā from her *tapas* to become a man so she could destroy Bhīṣma;⁴ and to shed tears for the dead Bhīṣma as only a mother can.⁵ The goddess also makes an important appearance in the famous myth of the descent of the Ganges from heaven to earth. In this myth, Bhagīratha propitiates her with fierce austerities and induces her to descend to earth to wash and purify the bones of his forbears, the wicked Sāgaras; and to coincidentally fill up the ocean that had been drunk dry by the mighty sage Agastya as a favour to the gods.⁶ As the Gaṅgā was considered to

1) Ādiparvan, 91-93.

2) Udyogaparvan, 179.22-30..

3) *Ibid.*, 184.15-17.

4) *Ibid.*, 187.29-40.

5) Ṣāntiparvan, 154.26. Kṛṣṇa consoles her at *ibid.*, 154.27-29.

6) See Āraṇyakaparvan, 107.13-25, 108.1-14. For the story of the Sāgaras, see Āraṇyakaparvan 104.6-22, 105.1-25, 106.1-27. For Agastya's consumption of the ocean, see Āraṇyakaparvan, 102.15-23, 103.1-19.

have inestimable qualities of purification' the goddess's boon to Bhagīratha was of great benefit to the mortal inhabitants of Earth.

Garuḍa is the most important of the Epic's many animal divinities to assume an individual role in the affairs of the triple-world; and indeed, he has effectively risen from the lower echelons to a rank at least commensurate with the higher gods. Garuḍa's principal exploit in the Epic is to carry off the elixir of immortality from Indra and the other Vedic gods. In the days of old, it is related, Garuḍa's mother Vinatā and her sister Kadrū wagered their freedom on the colour of the tail of Uccaiḥcravas, the horse that arose at the churning of the ocean. But Kadrū cheated and Vinatā and her son Garuḍa were enslaved to Kadrū and her one thousand snake sons. When Garuḍa asked the snakes how they might be freed, the snakes demanded the elixir of immortality from the gods.² Garuḍa achieved this with ease, routing (*vikṣiptās*) the Vedic gods and leaving them torn and bloodied from his beak, talons and wings.³ However, after Indra conceded the birds superior strength and sought his friendship, Garuḍa allowed the anxious king of gods to steal the elixir back before the snakes could have a taste. Indra's anxiety was considerable for those who drank the potion could thwart even the gods.⁴ Garuḍa's exploits also won him Viṣṇu's favour, and the great God chose Garuḍa to be his mount (*vāhanam*) and extended to him the attributes of immortality, even though Garuḍa had not even tasted the elixir.⁵

However, it is not just the Vedic gods who suffer from Garuḍa's surpassing strength. As Garuḍa sets out to obtain the elixir, he complains to his mother of hunger. Vinatā advises Garuḍa to feed on the thousands of mortal fisherfolk in their abode on the shore of the ocean; although she warns that he must on no account ever eat a brahmin. Thereupon the powerful and hungry bird fell upon the *niṣāda* 'like

1) See Anuṣāsanaparvan, 27.18-105.

2) See Ādiparvan, 18-23.

3) See *Ibid.*, 28.1-25, 29.1-10, 29.17-20.

4) *asmāṅste hi prabādheyur*, *ibid.*, 30.7. Also *ibid.*, 29.22-23, 30.8-22.

5) See *ibid.*, 29.13-16.

great Time the Ender' (*kāla ivāntako mahān*), and he crushed (*niṣūdayan*) that much suffering race of fisherfolk,¹ stopping only to regurgitate a brahmin who had burnt fiercely in his throat.²

But Garuḍa's hunger was still not sated, so his father Kaṣyapa suggested he feed upon the great seers (*maharṣiḥ*) Vibhāvasu and Supratīka who, afflicted by anger and greed, had mutually cursed each other to become an elephant and a tortoise.³ These seers, who continued the quarrel in their animal forms, finally filled the great bird up.

While both these gods of lower origin have risen to play roles of importance in the *Mahābhārata*, with consequences that are both beneficial and detrimental to mankind, it is apparent that their impact is limited and occasional. In no sense can they be considered as agents of destiny in the affairs of men.

If we move further up the hierarchy to the echelons of the higher gods and divine beings, we find more promising candidates in the form of the old Vedic gods, plus some more recent arrivals such as Skanda.⁴ In the *Mahābhārata*, these higher gods are intimately and constantly involved in the affairs of men; the path from Heaven to Earth is a very well worn one.

It is not even easy to tell the differences between men and gods, for physically and psychologically the gods have been thoroughly anthropomorphised. Although gods have divine and luminous bodies instead of the gross and material bodies of mortals, the external shape is of human form. And like men the gods are male or female, have spouses, beget children, suffer hunger and thirst, indulge in sexual intercourse, and enjoy play, revelry and the finer pleasures of life. In addition to a human shape, they have human feelings, passions and weaknesses. As well as love and

1) When the Pāṇḍavas make their escape from the fire-trap built for them at the behest of Duryodhana, it is a *niṣāda* woman and her five sons whom they burn in their place - and this at the suggestion of Yudhiṣṭhira. *Ādiparvan*, 136.1-4. And the astonishingly talented bowman Ekalavya, whose right thumb Droṇa demands in order to satisfy Arjuna's vanity, also was a *niṣāda*. *Ibid.*, 123.10-39.

2) *Ibid.*, 24.1-14, 25.1-2. 3) *Ibid.*, 25.10-18.

4) Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p.54.

compassion, the gods exhibit lust and desire, pride and jealousy, greed and deceit. Indra, especially, is subject to all the weaknesses of worldly men. Generally, the higher gods are made more or less in the image of man - though not entirely. As Duṣṣānta finds out at her *svayaṃvara*, unlike mortals gods do not perspire, blink, cast a shadow, become dusty, or quite touch the ground with their feet, and nor do their garlands ever wither.¹ The principal factor that is supposed to distinguish gods and men is that the gods are deemed to be immortal. But in the Hindu system this does not mean that the gods are free of death - merely that they have a longer life; for at the end of the cosmic cycle the gods too dissolve back into the primordial unity.

However, much as the relationship between gods and men is important, it is secondary to what is the central theme in Epic (and Hindu) mythology, the eternal conflict between gods and demons. It is within this context that the interaction between gods and men must always be considered.

The cause of this conflict has been a source of scholarly disagreement. Some scholars see it essentially as a conflict between good and evil.² However, a recent and influential study of the problem concludes otherwise:

Thus the conflict between gods and demons in Hinduism does not represent a conflict between good and evil, not because good and evil do not conflict in the Hindu view (though many texts would support this view) but because these moral categories do not apply to the two superhuman factions.³

The demons, Professor O'Flaherty argues, are not normally held responsible for the origin of evil, and nor do they always represent evil and misfortune, just as the gods do not always represent unmitigated 'good'.⁴ Indeed, 'the one invariable characteristic of the gods is that they are the enemies of the demons, and the one invariable characteristic of the demons is that they are opposed to the gods. ... the

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 54.23-24.

2) J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, p.162; and A.B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upaniṣads*, vol.1, p.72.

3) O'Flaherty, *Problem of Evil ... op.cit.*, p.63.

4) *Ibid.*, chapters 4-6.

two groups, as groups are not fundamentally morally opposed." Therefore, 'The crucial distinction between gods and demons is power.'² There is truth in all this, but there is a danger that too much has been concluded from too little.

While it is quite true that the demons are seldom held responsible for the origins of evil, the argument that 'the ambiguous nature of the demons (...) in Hinduism makes them totally unsuitable to bear the blame for the origin of evil'³ is at best only partly true. For, from our examination of the cosmogonic myths it should be apparent that, given the position the demons occupy on the scale of creation, they could scarcely even be considered as the origin of evil. In the cosmogonic myths, the origin of evil (and good) must invariably come back to the great Gods who repeatedly create, preserve and destroy the triple-world, in which the demons and higher gods are merely subordinate actors. In truth, the demons might more fairly be considered as the victims of evil, for they are created with a demonic nature (*svabhāva*) which they can never ultimately escape. However, just because the demons are not responsible for the origins of evil, it does not follow that they do not represent the forces of evil.

Certainly in the Vedic literature the demons are considered a menace to the triple-world, not so much because they represent the forces of evil in an ethical sense, but because they represent the forces of chaos and disorder. In similar fashion the gods represent the forces of order which support *ṛta*; and by implication are a force for good in the triple-world, even if their actions may not always seem so.⁴ The fears of the Vedic Indians about the fragility of creation are here mythologically expressed in terms of the opposition between gods and demons, order and disorder, and less directly, good and bad.

In the Epic period this instinctive fear that the world order represented a precarious balance between order and chaos remained strong, and continued to find

1) Ibid., p.58.

2) Ibid., p.63.

3) Ibid., p.57.

4) F.B.J. Kuiper, 'The Basic Concept of Vedic Religion', History of Religions, vol.15 (1975), pp.107-120; Keith, op.cit., vol.1, pp.83-85.

expression in the mythology of gods versus demons. The Epic cosmogonic myths alone make this clear enough. It will be recalled that in one myth it is related how Brahmā declared the *dharma* to newly created creatures. The gods and *ṛṣis* accepted *dharma*; while the demons, full of anger, greed and pride, worked for the destruction of *dharma* and the ascendancy of *adharma*. They harassed all creatures of the triple-world and showed no compassion. Given their created nature, their reaction to Brahmā's teaching was only to be expected. Another cosmogonic myth relates how the *asuras* called the *Krodhavaças* ('power of anger') were of cruel deeds and crushers of their enemies, while the *Kāleyas* were powerful and destructive *dānavas*, and the *rākṣasas* were known as *nairṛtas* or 'sons of destruction'. And in a Vaiṣṇavite creation myth, Viṣṇu promises that when *daityas* devoted to harm and terrible *rākṣasas* should arise in the world creating the ascendancy of *adharma*, he would descend to earth to restore *dharma*.

Elsewhere, too, the gods choose the way of *dharma* and the demons the way of *adharma*, although their choices can only but be derived from the *svabhāvas* with which they were created. During their forest exile, Lomaça reassures Yudhiṣṭhira with the following story of the due reward for good and evil:

Formerly in the Age of the Gods, I saw it all, O Lord; the gods found pleasure in *dharma*, the demons abandoned *dharma*. The gods visited the fords, O Bhārata, the demons did not; not abiding by *dharma*, pride entered them first. From pride arose arrogance and from arrogance came forth anger; then from anger (arose) shamelessness, (and) shamelessness destroyed their conduct. Patience, fortune, and *dharma* soon deserted those (demons who had become) shameless, arrogant, vile in conduct, and false in religious observance. Then fortune went to the gods, (and) misfortune to the demons, O king. Possessed by misfortune, their minds afflicted by pride, dissension entered the *daityas* and *dānavas*. Then, O Kaunteya, destruction soon befell these *dānavas* who were overpowered by misfortune (and) dissension, overcome by pride, lacking rites, senseless, and overcome by arrogance. Then, without honour, the *daityas* went to complete destruction.¹

As well as order and disorder, many other concerns are expressed by Epic man in his mythology, one of the most important being *dharma*. As we have seen, by the time of the *Mahābhārata*, *dharma* had developed into a complicated and demanding system. And as other heterodox faiths had their own views on the subject, Epic Indians could

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- 1) Purā devayuge caiva dr̥ṣṭaṃ sarvaṃ mayā vibho/
 Arocayansurā dharmam dharmam tatyajire asurāḥ//
 Tīryāni devā vivīṇāviṣṇābhāratāsaurāḥ/
 Tānadharmakṛto darpah pūrvameva samāviṣat//
 Darpānmānaḥ samabhavanmānātkrodho vyajāyata/
 Krodhādahristato alajjā vṛttam teṣāṃ tato anaṣat//
 Tānalajjāngatahrikānhīnavṛttānvṛthāvratān/
 Kṣamā lakṣmīṣca dharmāṣca nacirātprajahustataḥ/
 Lakṣmīstu devānagamadalakṣmīrasurānṛpa//
 Tānalakṣmīsamāviṣṭāndarpopahatacetasah/
 Daiteyāndānanāṅcaiva kalirapyāviṣattataḥ//

be forgiven for possessing grave doubts about the whole subject of duty. Quite naturally these confusions came to be expressed and explored in the realm of mythology. This is evident in the tendency noted before to extend to gods and demons the rigours of the human system of *dharma*, with various torturous dharmic complications for both. But Indra's problems in being pursued by the sin of *brahmahatya* ('brahmin-murder') after the destruction of a brahmin demon are as nothing (at least there are expiations) compared to the dharmic difficulties stored up for virtuous demons, who struggle against their own nature to follow a universal code of dharmic virtue.

All this, though, inevitably complicates the basis of the traditional opposition between gods and demons; but the situation is only complicated, not changed, for the old concern for a balance between the forces of order and disorder continued side by side, and remained just as strong. In other words, some Epic myths concerning gods and demons continue to reflect the traditional concern for order and disorder; while others are affected by a newer concern for *dharma*. But, even with the latter myths, the influence of concerns about order and disorder are never entirely absent.

It is significant that those demons - notably Prahvāda, Bali, Vairocana, Namuci, Vṛtra, Viṣvārūpa - who do throw up their demonic *svadharma* for an absolute code of *dharma* are invariably ill-rewarded for their efforts. There are various possibilities. A god may simply despatch the demon forthwith, as Indra does with the threat from Viṣvārūpa.¹ In other myths, a god destroys the virtuous demon through sheer treachery. Indra's disposal of Vṛtra, with assistance from Viṣṇu, is the main Epic example.² In yet other myths a god simply steals the demon's virtuous character by means of outright deceit and fraud. Again, Indra is the main culprit in

 Tānalakṣmīsamāviṣṭāndānavāṅkalīnā tathā/
 Darpābhībhūtānkaunteya kriyāhīnānacetasaḥ//
 Mānābhībhūtānacirādvīnāṣaḥ pratyapadyata/
 Niryaçasyāstato daityāḥ kṛtsnaḥ vilayaṃ gatāḥ//

- 1) Udyogaparvan, 9.3-31. 2) *Ibid.*, 9.40-52, 10.1-43, and Çāntiparvan, 272.1-44. Also compare Çalyaparvan, 42.27-37 for Indra's deceitful and treacherous destruction of the asura Namuci. c.f. M. Bloomfield, 'The Story of Indra and Namuci', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.xv (1893), pp.143-63.

the *Mahābhārata* while the demon king Prahvāda is the principal victim.¹ Viṣṇu's disposal of the far too generous Bali is also mentioned.² As if this were not enough, in other myths the demon's virtue and *dharma* simply wane and disappear with the passage of time.³ In other words, the virtuous demons just never win. Indeed, with virtuous demons their adherence to eternal *dharma* and devotion to brahmins is their weakness; because it is so counter to their demonic *svadharma*, it allows the god to engineer their defeat or it cannot stand against the passage of time. The virtuous demons, the myths almost seem to say, would have stood a better chance if they had stuck by their demonic *svadharma*.

The unstated assumption of the myths would seem to be that though demons might throw off their *svadharma*, nevertheless their *svabhāva* or inherent nature must, one way or another, ultimately prevail. In the Epic, demons - whatever their good intentions - are still demons and are therefore a threat to the order of the triple-world. It is noteworthy that while Indra treacherously destroys the virtuous Vṛtra, whom he rightly fears, with the demon's death the skies cleared up and an auspicious breeze began to blow; and all the gods, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, snakes and great seers gave praise to Indra and Viṣṇu.⁴ Elsewhere it is related that with Viṣṇu's displacement of Bali, and the return of Indra as king of the gods, and the re-establishment of sacrifices to the gods and the fourfold order of *varṇas*, there was again prosperity in the triple-world (*saṃr̥dhyamāne trailokye*).⁵ Bhīṣma, too, relates that 'When the demons had been defeated (and) Çakra had become the Lord of the triple-world, all creatures prospered (lit. rose up) (and were) devoted to truth and *dharma*.'⁶

Similarly, though gods may act deceitfully and treacherously and for their own

1) Çāntiparvan, 124.19-60.

2) *Ibid.*, 220.7.

3) *Ibid.*, 218.12-14, 221.26-79.

4) Udyogaparvan, 10.39-41.

5) Çāntiparvan, 220.7-8.

6) Parābhūteṣu daityeṣu çakre tribhuvaneçvare/

Prajāḥ samuditāḥ sarvāḥ satyadharmaparāyaṇāḥ// Anuçāsanaparvan, 82.7.

selfish motives, nevertheless they remain gods and their actions ultimately work for the ascendancy of *dharma* and order. In the end, the old concern for a balance between order and disorder presses its effect upon variant myths concerned with virtuous demons and the complexities of *dharma*. And much as the virtuous demon (and the deceitful god) add variety and interest to Epic mythology, and much as we may feel sympathy for their plight, we should not forget that they are not typical of your Epic demon. Far more typical are the doings of Unda and Upasunda, and the fearsome Kāleyas, who set themselves on the conquest of the gods and the despoliation of the triple-world.¹

To conclude, the central drama in Epic mythology is the eternal conflict between gods and demons, who represent (though they do not originate) the forces of *dharma* and *adharma*, order and disorder, and less directly good and evil. Though man is not a principal participant in this cosmic conflict, he plays a supporting role of great importance for the gods. For the sacrificial offerings of men alone sustain the strength of the gods in their struggle. Men and gods are natural allies in the struggle against the demons and the forces of *adharma*. They exist in a symbiotic relationship of mutual advantage which is well attested in the Epic.

In one myth the gods concisely explain the interrelationship of the triple-world when they all approach the great God Viṣṇu for help against the demonic Kāleyas who had been slaughtering brahmins and destroying sacrifices:

All the four kinds of creatures exist on gifts from here; (and) having been prospered, they prosper the dwellers in heaven with oblations and offerings. For the worlds proceed so, relying the one on the other. ... And when the brahmins are destroyed, the earth will go to its destruction. Then, when the earth is destroyed, Heaven will go to its destruction.²

1) Ādiparvan, 201-204; and Udyogaparvan, 98-101.

2) Itaḥ pradānādvartante prajāḥ sarvāṣṭadivīdhaḥ/

Tā bhāvitā bhāvayanti havyakavyairdivaukasaḥ// (1)

Lokā hyevaṃ vartayanti anyonyaṃ samupāçritāḥ/

Kṣīneṣu ca brāhmaṇeṣu prthivī kṣayameṣyati/ (2)

Tataḥ prthivyāṃ kṣīṇāyāṃ tridivāṃ kṣayameṣyati// (4) Āraṇyakaparvan, 101.1-2,4.

In another myth, after the creation has occurred all the gods approach Viṣṇu and ask what their jurisdiction (*adhikāro*) was to be. Viṣṇu ordains an interdependent relationship with men:

O Gods, arising out of my grace, this shall be your distinctive characteristic. You will be revered with sacrifices (which are) completed with with the choicest gifts. In *yuga* after *yuga* you will be enjoyers of the fruits of action. And also, O Gods, in all worlds men will worship you with sacrifices (and) will distribute to you shares produced in accordance with the *Vedas*. ... Created for your respective jurisdictions, you - who think about all matters in the (triple-)world - must uphold the worlds strengthened by the fruit of sacrificial shares.'

When Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma about the origins of kingship, he explains that at first there was no such institution for all creatures protected each other by means of *dharma*. But with the passage of time, men came under the sway of folly (*mohavaṣaṃ*) and their adherence to *dharma* declined. Men became subject to greed, desire, anger and sexual lust. With confusion in the world of men, the *Vedas* and *dharma* were lost. And so, stricken with fear, grief and suffering, the gods sought refuge with Brahmā and expressed their concern: 'assuredly, then, we shall be reduced to equality with mortals, O Lord of the three worlds. For we pour downwards, and mortals pour upwards (to us). Therefore, because of the cessation of their (religious) rites we suffer danger. O Grandfather, reflect on what is for our well-being in this matter.'² Brahmā duly ordained the institution of kingship.

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- 1) Etadvo lakṣaṇaṃ devā matprasādasamudbhavam/
 Yūyaṃ yajñairiḥyamānāḥ samāptavaradakṣiṇaiḥ/
 Yuge yuge bhaviṣyadhvaṃ pravṛttiphalabhogināḥ// (53)
 Yajñairye cāpi yakṣyanti sarvalokeṣu vai surāḥ/
 Kalpayiṣyanti vo bhāgāṅste narā vedakalpitāḥ// (54)
 Yūyaṃ lokāndhārayadhvaṃ yajñabhāgaphaloditāḥ/
 Sarvārthacintakā loke yathādhikāranīrmitāḥ// (56)
 Yāḥ kriyāḥ pracariṣyanti pravṛttiphalasatkṛtāḥ/
 Tābhirāpyāyitabalā lokānvai dhārayiṣyatha// (57) *Çāntiparvan*, 327.53-54, 56-57.
 Compare *Çāntiparvan*, 282.13 where the gods take delight in the virtue (*dharme*) and happiness of mortals.
- 2) Tataḥ sma samatām yātā martyaistribhuvaneṣvara//
 Adho hi varṣamaśmākaṃ martyāstūrdhvaḥpravarṣiṇaḥ/
 Kriyāvyuparamātteṣāṃ tato agacchāma saṃçayam//
 Atra niḥçreyasaṃ yannastaddhyāyasva pitāmaha/ *ibid.*, 59.25-27. Generally see *ibid.*, 59.16-27. In the *Anuṣāsanaparvan* the God Vāyu relates that once the gods were conquered by the *asuras*, and their sacrifice and *svadhā* to the *manes* were stolen. Moreover 'The religious rites and sacrifices of the mortals (were stopped) by the *dānavas*, O Bull of the Haihaya. Then, their lordship lost, the

It is the sacrifice, then, which links gods and men together in a relationship of mutual advantage. Men honour the gods with sacrifices in which they offer shares or portions, and these offerings are the very food of the gods. Traditionally the offerings were of *soma* and cooked meat; although as the doctrine of *ahimsa* caught hold, vegetable offerings were more normal.¹ In turn, the gods exercised their beneficial influence to ensure the prosperity of the world; with Indra, for instance, specialising in the sending of rain.² This benefited, of course, not just men, but the gods too; for ultimately both derived their sustenance from a prosperous earth.

If men and gods are natural allies, by implication men and demons are opposed to each other. Normally in the *Mahābhārata* demons and men are not antagonists in their own right;³ but as sustainers of the god's strength, men are vulnerable to attack by demons intent on cutting off the god's source of supply. As the demons Unda and Upasunda brutally concluded: 'The royal seers (and) the brahmins prosper the energy, strength and the splendour of the gods with their great sacrifices (and) oblations. All of us united together must completely destroy all these mighty enemies of the *asuras*.'⁴

In the *Mahābhārata*, the higher gods and men interact principally within this framework of mutual advantage which centres on the sacrifice. However, while the sacrifice defines and guarantees the alliance between gods and men, it does not guarantee harmonious relations under all circumstances.

To begin with there is an element of competition built into the very

gods wandered the earth - so it is heard.'

Karmeṣṭyā mānavānām ca dānavairhaihayarṣabha/

Bhraṣṭaiṣvaryaṣtato devāṣceruḥ prthivīmiti ṣṛutih// Anuṣāsanaparvan, 140.3.

It took the sage Agastya to rescue the fortunes of the gods. *Ibid.*, 140.1-11.

1) See, for instance, Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 94.1-22.

2) Indra was, for instance, also the sender of rain. Compare, too, Çāntiparvan, 74.15 for the idea that Indra does not rain down where religious observances are not adhered to.

3) Though compare Çāntiparvan, 283.7-17 where the demons assail and control men because they cannot endure or tolerate their virtue (*dharma*).

4) Rājarṣayo mahāyajñairhavyakavyairdviṣātayaḥ/

Tejo balaṃ ca devānām vardhayanti ṣṛiyaṃ tathā//

Teṣāmevaṃ pravṛddhānām sarveṣāmasuradviṣām/

Sambhūya sarvairasmābhiḥ kāryaḥ sarvātmanā vadhāḥ// Ādiparvan, 202.10-11.

interdependence of the relationship. From the point of view of mortals, gods occupy an exclusive and privileged position; and so it was quite natural that mortals should desire to become like gods. However, gods could only but be suspicious of mortals who desired to rise above their station and threaten their divine privileges. A myth recounted by the sage Vyāsa sets the problem well. In former times the gods attended a sacrificial session in the Naimiṣa forest at which Yama acted as the *çāmitr*¹ priest: 'Then Yama, O king, when consecrated there, no longer killed mortal creatures. Thereupon these creatures, freed from death and the passage of Time, grew numerous.'² Anxious and worried, Çakra and the other gods approached Prajāpati:

Then, assembled together, they addressed the teacher of the world: 'Our fear is severe from this growth of men. Therefore, agitated through fear (and) desirous of happiness, we have all come to you for refuge.'
 Brahmā replied: 'Why are you afraid because of men when you are all immortal? Let there never be fear in you from the presence of mortals.'
 The gods said: 'Because mortals have become immortal, there is no distinction anymore. Terrified at this lack of distinction, we have come here to seek distinction.'³

Brahmā reassured the gods that Yama was only temporarily preoccupied with the sacrifice. When he had finished, death (*antakālaḥ*) would return to men. As with the interdependence between the brahmin and *çūdra*, so with gods and mortal men the exalted position of the one depends upon the lowly position of the other. In this

1) The priest who carves the sacrificial animal.

2) Tato yamo dīkṣitastatra rāja-
 nnāmārayatkiṃcidapī prajābhyah/
 Tataḥ prajāstā bahulā babhūvuḥ
 kālātipātānmaraṇātprahīṇāḥ// *ibid.*, 189.2.

3) Tato abruvaṇllokagurum sametā
 bhayaṃ nastivraṃ mānuṣāṇāṃ vivṛddhyā/
 Tasmādbhayaḍdudvijantaḥ sukhepsavaḥ
 prayāma sarve çaraṇaṃ bhavantam//
 Kiṃ vo bhayaṃ mānuṣebhyo yūyaṃ sarve yadāmarāḥ/
 Mā vo martyasakāçādvai bhayaṃ bhavatu karhicit//
 Martyā hyamartyāḥ saṃvṛttā na viçeṣo asti kaçcana/
 A viçeṣāḍdudvijanto viçeṣārthamihāgatāḥ// *ibid.*, 189.4-6.

myth the prospect of the distinction being bridged with the abolition of death fills the gods with fear and horror. Fortunately for the higher gods, Brahmā will not contemplate such disorder in his creation.

In Epic times this element of competition took on a sharper edge with the belief that through *tapas* men could become not just equal to the higher gods but greater than them.¹ Thus the accumulation of ascetic power by prideful men could easily be deemed a threat by the more suspicious and jealous of the gods; and most especially by Indra. Indeed, despite the emphasis given to the interdependence between gods and men, there are occasional suggestions that the gods deliberately corrupt men out of fear; although logically this must ultimately harm the gods too. When an unnamed brahmin sees mortals afflicted by lust, anger, greed, fear, arrogance, sleep, sloth and indolence, the divine cloud Kuṇḍadhāra explains: 'Men are tightly enchained by these (for) the gods fear men. So, at the command of the gods, they hinder (men) in all ways.'² And in amidst one of the more misogynist sections of the Epic, Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira how formerly men were characterised by righteousness, and so naturally attained to the dignity of gods - a circumstance which much alarmed the gods. Therefore all the gods approached Brahmā who, to allay their fears, created women with an Atharvan rite. Brahmā gave to them the desire of enjoying all kinds of carnal pleasure and so they began to pursue virtuous men. Brahmā further created anger and lust, and afflicted by these forces, virtuous men now sought the companionship of these sinful women.³ However, the peculiar tension produced between gods and men by ascetic power is a theme we shall explore more

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- 1) R.C. Zaehner points to the conflict inherent in ascetism: 'The whole ascetic tradition, whether it be Buddhist, Platonist, Manichean, Christian, or Islamic, springs from that most polluted of all sources, the Satanic sin of pride, the desire to be "like gods". We are not gods, we are social, irrational animals, designed to become rational social animals.' Zaehner, *Hinduism*, p.235.
 - 2) *Etairlokāḥ susaṃruddhā devānāṃ mānuṣādbhayaṃ / Tathaiva devavacanādvighnaṃ kurvanti sarvaṇaḥ* // *Çāntiparvan*, 263.47. Presumably the idea is that after Brahmā, Viṣṇu or Śiva puts these vices into the creation, the gods then inflict them on men.
 - 3) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 40.5-10.

fully below.¹

However, outside of the sacrifice and this shared fear, the higher gods do not often act as a group towards men; although they normally do so act towards demons. On one singular occasion the gods as a group do take arms against the mortal Arjuna and the divine Kṛṣṇa in an attempt to save the Khāṇḍava forest from destruction - only to be soundly defeated.² Elsewhere the gods do occasionally show up together to watch a *svayaṃvara*,³ a battle,⁴ or some other notable mortal event; but they are scarcely more than spectators who cheer and applaud.⁵ Very occasionally a disembodied voice (*vāguvācāṣarīrīṇī*), acting as a divine messenger, will speak from the skies as a guarantor or witness of some earthly event. For instance, when King Duṣṣanta repudiates in court Çakuntalā's story that she is his wife and that Sarvadamana is his son and heir, a divine voice confirms Çakuntalā's version and bids the king accept his family.⁶ However, this unnamed divine voice may represent the will of a great God, for elsewhere this same disembodied voice warns Indra and the gods that they cannot defeat Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.⁷

More normally the higher gods act substantially as individuals in their relations with men; and therefore they act out of their own individual aims and desires. This is only to be expected in such a diverse and uncohesive pantheon. The consequences of these divine actions both help and hinder men, but as they are in the nature of individual relations, it is not possible to say that these divine actions represent some collective principle of amity, hatred or indifference. Indeed, we saw above that the higher gods are made in the image of men, and just as the behaviour of men towards family and friends can be erratic - both considerate and inconsiderate - so can be the behaviour of individual gods towards men.

In the course of the *Mahābhārata* there seem few bounds on the nature of the

1) See below pp.

2) See Ādiparvan, 217-19.

3) e.g. Draupadī's *svayaṃvara*, *ibid.*, 178.6-13, 179.17.

4) e.g. Āraṇyakaparvan, 195.14-17, and the references for p.155, footnote 1.

5) Only in the conflict between Bhīṣma and Rāma Jamadagnya do the gods intervene. Udyogaparvan, 186.1-5.

6) See Ādiparvan, 69.28-36.

7) *Ibid.*, 219.14-18.

interaction between gods and men. As we have seen, the goddess Gaṅgā actually marries the mortal King Çaṁtanu and begets Bhīṣma by this union. The Sun God marries his peerless daughter Tapatī to his ardent mortal devotee King Saṁvarana.¹ Mātali, Indra's divine charioteer, in search of a spouse for his nubile daughter, contemplates mortals, rejects demons (there are limits!), and finally settles for a snake.² The god Sūrya begets on Kuntī the mighty Karṇa, while Dharma, Vayu, and Indra beget Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīmasena and Arjuna on Kuntī, and the Aṣvins beget Sahadeva and Nakula on Madrī. The World Guardians seek Damayantī's hand at her *svayamvara*, but impressed by her devotion and love for the mortal Nala, the celestials permit their union and bestow choice boons.³

Individual high gods help mortals out of various difficulties, especially those who sing their praises. Thus, after being praised, the divine healers the Aṣvins rescue, heal and reward the gluttonous student Upamanyu after he had fallen down a well and become blind.⁴ Similarly, upon being praised, Indra and Agni aid another student Uttan̄ka after the earrings he had attained as a *guru's* gift from the queen of King Pauṣya had been carried off into the kingdom of snakes by Takṣaka (the king of snakes).⁵ And it is Garuḍa (on behalf of Viṣṇu) who comes to the aid of yet another student, Gālava, who unwisely presses that most ill-tempered of *ṛṣis*, Viçvāmitra, as to what he wanted for a *guru's* gift. Angered, Viçvāmitra finally snaps that he wanted brought 800 moon-white horses with a black ear each - and to be quick about it.⁶ The Sun God also helps Yudhiṣṭhira out of his worry over how to feed the hordes of brahmins who had accompanied them into the forest. After Yudhiṣṭhira had honoured the Sun God with fierce austerities and praise, Sūrya agreed to provide the necessary food for the next twelve years.⁷ Again, it is the Sun God to whom Draupadī appeals when her virtue is threatened by the determinedly

1) *Ibid.*, 160.1-20.

3) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 51-54.

5) *Ibid.*, 3.101-176.

7) see *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 2.5-13, 3.1-30, 4.1-3.

2) *Udyogaparvan*, 95-102.

4) *Ādiparvan*, 3.32-78.

6) *Udyogaparvan*, 104-117.

amorous Kicaka, while the Pāṇḍavas wile away the thirteenth year in disguise at the court of King Virāṭa. Sūrya consigned an invisible *rākṣasa* for her protection; and his services were well needed.¹ Occasionally, too, an individual god (or gods) acts as an unimpeachable witness in earthly affairs. For instance, when Nala questions Damayantī's purity, the Gods of the Wind, Sun and Moon all speak for her when Damayantī calls upon them.²

The higher gods also make periodic appearances in what is the core event of the Epic, the great battle, including its lead-up and aftermath. The degree of their direct involvement, though, is quite limited. Once the portions or fragments (*aṅga*) of the gods have become incarnated on earth in the form of the principal participants, the higher gods, with the possible exception of Indra, remain surprisingly aloof from the action. They also appear ignorant of the course of events. When all the celestials come to view the great struggle between Arjuna and Karna, heated disputes arose as to who would be victorious.³

A major contribution of the higher gods is to make sure the Pāṇḍavas are adequately equipped for the great battle. Thus it is the God of Fire who, desirous of feeding on the Khāṇḍava forest, commands Varuṇa to hand over to Arjuna the mighty bow Gāṇḍīva (that had been created by Brahmā himself)⁴, two quivers that would never be exhausted of arrows, and a divine chariot which was invincible to gods and demons alike.⁵ To Kṛṣṇa, Agni gave a discus that would always return to his hand in battle and a great club that roared like a thunderbolt.⁶ With these mighty weapons, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa held off the gods and allowed Agni to sate his enormous appetite. But more importantly, Arjuna's weapons were to be critical in the coming battle. And during the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile, Yudhiṣṭhira sends Arjuna on a mission to obtain more divine weapons from the gods. After Arjuna performs extreme mortifications and fights a wondrous battle with Śiva who was disguised as a

1) Virāṭaparvan, 14.16-19, 15.1-9.

3) Karna-parvan, 63.30.

5) *Ibid.*, 216.1-10..

2) Āraṇyakaparvan, 75.7-15.

4) Ādiparvan, 216.18

6) *Ibid.*, 216.11-25..

mountain hunter, the four World Guardians appear to him. Yama bestows on Arjuna his staff of death, Varuṇa his inescapable nooses, and Kubera a weapon that induces sleep in enemies.¹ The fourth World Guardian, Indra, takes his 'son' Arjuna to Heaven for a sojourn of five years where he teaches him all the weapons of the gods, as well as having him taught the art of dancing.²

Indra also intervenes in other ways to further the cause of the Pāṇḍavas. For instance, when Duryodhana and his party set out to mock the Pāṇḍavas during their forest exile, Indra sends the *gandharvas*, under their king Citrasena, to bind Duryodhana and his cohorts, and to bring them to the realm of the gods. However, the ever compassionate Yudhiṣṭhira intervenes to save his erstwhile tormentor from this indignity.³ Indra's most important intervention on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas, though, is to limit the power and might of Karṇa, the one warrior on the Kaurava side who filled Yudhiṣṭhira with anxiety and left him sleepless at night. According to the text, it is Maghavat (i.e. Indra) who created (śṛṣṭo) the awesome Ghaṭotkaca for the destruction of Karṇa whose valour was unequalled. By paternity Ghaṭotkaca was the son of Bhīma and the *rākṣasa* woman Hidimbā. Much more important, though, was Indra's abuse of Karṇa's nobility to rob him of his inborn earrings and armour which made him invulnerable to gods, demons and men alike. Karṇa's earrings had arisen from the elixir of immortality itself. Aware of Karṇa's custom (çīlam) never to refuse anything when begged by a brahmin, Indra came to him in this very disguise to beg his earrings and armour. Though, Karṇa had been pre-warned by his father, Sūrya, he still fulfilled his vow on the grounds that it would be to his fame and Indra's disgrace. In return for cutting from his body his earrings and armour and giving them besmeared with blood to Indra, Karṇa asked only for the boon of Indra's 'infallible spear' (amoghāṃ çaktim), and accepted the limitation that it would slay only one powerful enemy before returning to Indra. Karṇa, of course, wished to slay

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 42.17-33..

2) *Ibid.*, 42.36-39, 45.5-9..

3) *Ibid.*, 235.1-15..

only one powerful enemy in battle - Arjuna.¹ In another myth, it is Indra who provokes Rāma Jāmadagnya to curse Karṇa. To his charioteer Çalya, Karṇa relates how he formerly lived with Rāma in the disguise of a brahmin in order to learn from him celestial weapons. Now Indra, for the welfare (*hitārthinā*) of Arjuna, took on the form of an ugly worm (*kīṭasya tanuṃ virūpāmā*) and bored into his thigh in the presence of Rāma. Now from fear of Rāma, his *guru*, Karṇa did not move. But Rāma observed this, and when questioned Karṇa confessed that he was a *sūta*. Rāma thereupon imprecated a curse that when Karṇa needed the divine weapon he had learnt, it would not come to his mind.²

Indra's deceit of Karṇa is probably the most significant interference by a high god in the central story line of the *Mahābhārata*. Other instances are sporadic at best. On two occasions the god Dharma makes an appearance, disguised first as a *yakṣa*,³ and then as a dog⁴ to test Yudhiṣṭhira's adherence to the *dharma*. Sūrya, too, puts in the occasional further appearance. When Arjuna and Karṇa line up for individual combat at Droṇa's public showing of his students' skills, Indra appeared in the form of thunder clouds and covered his 'son' in shade, while Sūrya bathed his 'son' Karṇa in bright sunlight. But neither god played any further part in the proceedings. When Kuntī attempts to talk Karṇa into fighting on the side of the Pāṇḍavas (for he is the eldest of her sons), Sūrya appeared briefly to endorse her arguments⁵ - but without success. Sūrya also mourns at his son's death.⁶ Finally, the gods as a group, variously accompanied by *rṣis*, *yakṣas* and *gandharvas* etc., come to watch the more important parts of the conflict; but it is notable that

1) See *ibid.*, 284.5-39; 285-86; 294.1-40.

2) See Karṇaparvan, 42. In a longer variant version of this myth, the dreadful worm is not Indra but a *rākṣasa* called Gr̥tso who had been cursed by Bhṛgu (an ancestor of Rāma) for forcefully carrying off his beloved wife. In this myth Rāma, weak from his fierce austerities, lies down on Karṇa's lap, only to awake when polluted by Karṇa's bleeding thigh. Wrathfully he rounds on Karṇa that only a *kṣatriya* could endure such extreme pain. Karṇa must explain that, even worse, he is a lowly *sūta*. Çāntiparvan, 3.1-31.

3) Āraṇyakaparvan, 295-8.

4) Mahāprasthānikaparvan, 3.7-23.

5) Udyogaparvan, 144.2.

6) Karṇaparvan, 68.37.

they approve the acts of participants on both sides.¹

However, in other ways the doings of the higher gods are not at all beneficial to men. Many of these actions would seem to be due to the all too human weaknesses of some of the higher gods. One such source of difficulty in relations was the predilection of some gods for mortal women. In one story it is related how Agni was once caught as an adulterer (*pāradārikah*) after he had wandered the earth at will in the guise of a brahmin. Agni was brought before King Nīla of Māhiṣmatī; but when the *dharma*-observing king berated him for his behaviour, the Fire God blazed up in anger (*prajājvāla tataḥ kopād*). Surprised, the king bowed his head down to the god. Showing his grace (*cakre prasādam*), Agni proffered a boon, and the king chose that his troops should always be secure.² So caught deceitfully philandering with mortal women, the god's reaction was to first coerce the king with his divine anger, and then to buy him off with a boon. Indra, too, is a notorious philanderer quite prepared to adopt any deceitful disguise in the pursuit of his special penchant for the wives of ascetic brahmins.³ As well, being a god Indra had little inclination to take the karmic consequences of his actions like a mortal was supposed to. After his treacherous destruction of Vṛtra, Indra was afflicted by the sin of brahmin-murder. On the advice of Viṣṇu, he performed a Horse-sacrifice to expiate the sin and regain purity. Then Indra distributed the brahmin-murder over trees, rivers, mountains, earth and women. In this instance, Indra regains his divine purity, but at the expense of earth and mortals.⁴

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- 1) e.g. Virāṭaparvan, 51.1-17, 54.6-7; Bhīṣmaparvan, 91.63, 98.17; Droṇaparvan, 118.38-39, 131.135, 138.30-31, 145.12, 150.92, 167.5; Karṇaparvan, 11.27-32, 12.14-16, 40.114-5, 63.30-58, 64.1-2, 64.18-19, 68.51; Çalyaparvan, 12.42, 54.9, 56.65, 57.58.
 - 2) Sabhāparvan, 28.17-22.
 - 3) For Indra's rape of Ahalyā, the wife of the ṛṣi Gautama, see Çāntiparvan, 258.44-47; and for his failed seduction of Ruci, the wife of the ṛṣi Devaçarman, see Anuçāsanaparvan, 41-42.
 - 4) Udyogaparvan, 13.10-18; also Çāntiparvan, 273.10-63. In the Çāntiparvan version, Brahmā distributed Indra's brahminicide to fire, trees, herbs and grasses, the *apsarās*, waters, and in turn they were to pass it on to mortals who did not sacrifice, to mortals who cut the trees and grasses at the full moon, to men who cohabited with their wives during their courses, and to those who polluted the waters with bodily wastes.

A further complicating factor in the relations of gods and men is the ambivalent nature of certain gods. Of the higher gods, the most notable example in the *Mahābhārata* is Skanda; though the problem is not so much Skanda himself as the company he keeps. As general of the god's army and prominent destroyer of demons,¹ Skanda's *svadharma* is ultimately beneficial to men. But like the great God Īiva, Skanda is attended by various groups of malformed and vindictive beings. In the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, it is related that from the impact of Indra's thunderbolt on Skanda the lesser Kumāras (*kumārakāḥ*) were born. These sons and daughters of Skanda, who accompany him in battle, 'cruelly rob newborn babies and those still in the womb.'² Also associated with Skanda is a band of demonic Mothers who, with their terrible graspers, feed on foetuses, babies and children. At the particular request of Skanda they spare only those who give them due honour.³

Occasionally, too, the gods - rightly or wrongly - are considered to intervene in human affairs in a purely vengeful fashion. For instance, in the story of Nala after the caravan of merchants Damayantī had been travelling with was devastated by a herd of thirsty elephants in the great and dangerous forest, she grieved:

What wrong have I done that I found this caravan in the desolate forest (and now) it is destroyed by a herd of elephants - (and) surely because of my ill-fortune. Without doubt I am to undergo suffering for a very long time to come - as the old precept says, there is no dying for one whose time has not yet come - since I, in my suffering, was not now crushed by that herd of elephants. For, nothing happens to men in this world (that is) independent of fate. (But) not even in my childhood have I done anything injurious in action, thought or word, from which this suffering could come. I think it is because I refused the divine World Guardians, for the sake of Nāla, when they came to my Bridegroom Choice. Assuredly it is through their powers that I have become separated.⁴

1) Ālyaparvan, 45.48-82.

2) Ye haranti çīṣṇjātāṅgarbhasthāṅçaiva dāruṇāḥ// Āraṇyakaparvan, 217.1.

3) Āraṇyakaparvan, 219.14-44. For a list and brief description of these choice horrors, see Ālyaparvan, 45.1-37.

4) Aṣocattatra vaidharbhī kiṃ nu me duṣkṛtaṃ kṛtaṃ/
Yo api me nirjane araṇye saṃprāpto ayaṃ janārṇavaḥ/
Hato ayaṃ hastiyūthena mandabhāgyānmamaiva tu//
Prāptavyaṃ suciraṃ duḥkhaṃ mayā nūnamasaṃçayam/
Nāprāptakālo mriyate çrutaṃ vṛddhānuçāsanam//
Yannāhamadya mṛditā hastiyūthena duḥkhitā/
Na hyadaivakṛtaṃ kiṃcinnarāṇāmiha vidyate//
Na ca me bālabhāve api kiṃcidvyapakṛtaṃ kṛtaṃ/

In this instance, Damayantī contemplates karma as the cause of her misfortune; but quickly affixes blame on the World Guardians, and less directly on fate (*daiva*), although *daiva* might be better rendered by its etymological sense of 'divine will'.

The gods, then, are involved in human affairs in a wide range of ways. In Epic mythology there is certainly no yawning gulf between the gods in Heaven and men on earth. However, in all this coming and going there is only the very occasional suggestion that the interference of the higher gods is so pervasive and consistent that at least the significant, if not all, events in mortal affairs are controlled by them. In Vedic times, the higher gods may have been considered capable of controlling the lives of men, but in the Epic there are only fossilised remnants of their former greatness. Thus, after the new god Skanda had defeated Indra and burned the army of the gods, the great-spirited brahmins paid him honour and invited him to become the new Indra of the triple-world. Then Skanda innocently asked what exactly the Indra of all the worlds did (*kimindrah sarvalokānām karoti*). The *ṛṣis* explain:

Indra assigns to creatures their strength, vitality, offspring and happiness. So also, (when) satisfied, the Lord of Gods bestows all the shares. From the wicked he takes, to the virtuous he gives. The slayer of Bala directs creatures in their duties. He would become the sun where there was no sun, and likewise the moon where there was no moon. He becomes fire, wind, earth and water with their causes. This is what Indra does, for vast strength is in Indra.¹

Karmaṇā manasā vācā yadidaṃ duḥkhamāgatam//
 Manye svayaṃvarakṛte lokapālāḥ samāgatāḥ/
 Pratyākhyātā mayā tatra nalasyārthāya devatāḥ/
 Nūnaṃ teṣāṃ prabhāvena viyogaṃ prāptavatyaham// Āraṇyakaparvan, 62.12-16.

- 1) Indro diçati bhūtānām balaṃ tejah prajāḥ sukham/
 Tuṣṭaḥ prayacchati tathā sarvāndāyānsureçvaraḥ//
 Durvṛttānām saṃharati vṛttasthānām prayacchati/
 Anuçāsti ca bhūtāni kāryeṣu balasūdanaḥ//
 Asūrye ca bhavetsūryastathācandre ca candramāḥ/
 Bhavatyagniçca vāyuçca prthivyāpaçca kāraṇaiḥ//
 Etadindreṇa kartavyamindre hi vipulaṃ balaṃ/ Āraṇyakaparvan, 218.9-12.

Perhaps wisely, Skanda did not wish to be the Indra of the gods, even though Indra himself pressed that he accept. Instead, at Indra's behest, he became the commander of the god's army.¹ In this myth, Indra does seem to be largely responsible for allotting the fate of creatures, though with some cognisance of their deeds. However, in the great bulk of the *Mahābhārata* this is precisely what Indra and the higher gods do not seem to do. This may well have been the task of the higher gods - especially Varuṇa - in the Vedic period, but by Epic times the position and standing of the higher gods is much reduced. Ultimately the higher gods meddle in human affairs; they do not in any way play the role of agents of fate, dispensing to man his destiny. Indeed, the higher gods, in the *Mahābhārata*, have become so involved in the affairs of the triple-world as integral participants that they can scarcely any longer stand aside and play the role of overseer or supervisor, which would be the minimum requirement if they were to act as agents of fate. According to the cosmogonic myths it is the great Gods who fulfill this function, for they create, preserve and destroy the triple-world.

The *Mahābhārata* as a whole is heavy with the feeling that man's lot is controlled. It is predetermined or fated by forces that are external to him. Quite often the nature and source of these forces is given scant consideration; it is the effect alone that is of concern. In many contexts, though, the controlling force is conceived in personal terms, being traced to one or other of the great Gods, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Īiva, or to a personalised abstraction, the Dhātṛ, 'Placer', Vidhātṛ, 'Ordainer', and occasionally Īāstr, 'Ruler'.

From even a brief reading of the Epic, it is readily apparent how constantly the great Gods interfere in the affairs of the triple-world. The effect of their involvement is so persistent and pervasive that from the point of view of mortals they become true agents of predestination. The nature of this interference, though,

1) *Ibid.*, 218.13-22.

takes differing forms depending on the conception of the great God.

In the more theological parts, where closer consideration is given to the nature and purpose of God, the Supreme Being is looked upon not just as an entity that stands apart and beyond the created triple-world, but also as a sort of all-pervading divine potency which permeates nature and the human world and constitutes the very basis of their existence and functioning.¹ This divine potency permeated alike gods, humans, animals, trees and so on.² It is in the various praises and *stotras* to Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Īiva that this view may especially be found.

However, the identification of God with the functioning and being of the triple-world has serious consequences for the idea of fate and free-will.³ In some contexts the effect of God's indwelling of creation is to reduce man to the position of a powerless cypher controlled by the divine power. Thus the great God Nārāyaṇa (i.e. Viṣṇu), after freely identifying himself with the physical and mental forms of the universe, explains to the sage Mārkaṇḍeya that: 'I direct with my ordinance those dependent on bodies. They act not from their own will (but) with their minds controlled by me.'⁴ And in one of his praises of Īiva, Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhira: 'This entire universe acts through his activity alone.'⁵ When Nārāyaṇa propitiates Īiva in the Droṇaparvan, he extolls: 'The past, present, and future, which are unapproachable, come from you.'⁶ In the *Āntiparvan*, Nārāyaṇa and Nara praise themselves in the following terms: 'For we two know everything in the triple-world with (its creatures) moving and still: good and evil that will occur, has occurred,

1) God's immanence and transcendence of the triple-world is well expressed by Bhīṣma in a praise of Kṛṣṇa: 'Obeissance to you (who exists) in the three worlds; obeissance to you (who exists) above the three (worlds).' *Namaste triṣu lokeṣu namaste paratastriṣu/ Āntiparvan*, 51.4.

2) c.f. R.N. Dandekar, 'Hinduism' in C. Jonco Bleeker and G. Widengren, *Historia Religionum*, vol.ii, p.287.

3) These are especially acute in the *Bhagavadgīta* and will be considered more fully there.

4) *Madvidhānena vihitā mama dehavihārīṇaḥ/ Mayābhībhūtavijñānā viceṣṭante na kāmataḥ// Āraṇyakaparvan*, 187.22.

5) *Viceṣṭate jagaccedaṃ sarvamasyaiva karmanā// Sautikaparvan*, 17.9.

6) *Bhūtaṃ bhavyaṃ bhavitā cāpyadhrṣyaṃ tvatsambhūtā ... / Droṇaparvan*, 172.70.

or is occurring." In recounting Kṛṣṇa's greatness, Draupadī seems to assume a high degree of control by the great God in the affairs of the triple-world: 'O strong-armed one, all worldly affairs are dependent upon you.'² Sahadeva, too, tells the grieving Yudhiṣṭhira: 'O king, dwelling unseen in every soul, both Brahmā and Death assuredly cause creatures to fight.'³

Another method by which the immanent God controls the course of events in the triple-world is that of Time. Though Time in its embodied form does appear as an independent deity,⁴ nevertheless in the various praises and *stotras*, Īiva, Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa⁵ are all identified with Kāla, which thus becomes another means by which God becomes immanent in the creation. And, as we shall see in chapter three, Time in the *Mahābhārata* is very often perceived in a quite fatalistic sense. In other words, Time does not just measure, but predetermines the events which it brings to pass. Given the rather ambivalent fashion in which divine power was contemplated in the Hindu tradition, it is perhaps quite understandable that Time, with its impressive potential for bringing decay and destruction, should be regarded as a form of the divine energy.

In other contexts, where God's immanence in creation features, the emphasis is not so much on God's control of human activity, as on God actually being that activity in its entirety. The consequence is not just to compromise the idea of the meaningfulness of human activity, but also to compromise the idea of the individual as a separate and real entity. Thus not infrequently God is identified as the actor,

1) Sarvaṃ hi nau saṃviditaṃ trailokye sacarācare/

Yadbhaviṣyati vṛttaṃ vā vartate vā ṣubhāṣubham// Āntiparvan, 332.23.

2) Tvayi sarvaṃ mahābāho lokakāryaṃ pratiṣṭhitaṃ// Āraṇyakaparvan, 13.51.

3) Brahmamṛtyū ca tau rājannātmānyeva samāṣṛitau/

Adṛṣyamānau bhūtāni yodhayetāmasaṃṣayam// Āntiparvan, 13.5.

4) e.g. Ādiparvan, 59.33-34, 60.20, Sabhāparvan, 7.12, 8.26, Anuṣāsanaparvan, 1.

5) For Īiva, see Droṇaparvan, 173.67, Anuṣāsanaparvan, 16.17 & 51. For Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa, Āraṇyakaparvan, 13.20, Udyogaparvan, 66.13, Āntiparvan, 47.42. The identification of Time with one or other concepts of deity has deep roots in the Aryan tradition, and is very characteristic of Indo-Iranian thought. See S.G.F. Brandon, History, Time and Deity: A Historical and Comparative Study of the Conception of Time in Religious Thought and Practice, pp.31-34, 39-43, 63.

the action and the cause. In the very opening chapter of the *Mahābhārata*, the bard Ugraśravas, in a praise to Īiva as the Supreme Being, says: 'He is the causal connexion and the activity; and birth, death and rebirth.'¹ Saṃjaya, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer, praises Hari as 'the doer, and he who causes (action) to be done' (*kartā kārayitā ca saḥ*).² Bhīṣma, too, eulogises Kṛṣṇa in the same way: 'He is the doer and what is to be done' (*eṣa kartā ca kāryam*).³ And the god Nārāyaṇa describes Īiva as 'that essence of causes' (*kāraṇātmānam*)⁴ in a propitiation of the great God that freely identifies him with the universe. Elsewhere it is Nārāyaṇa who is praised as the Supreme God. The sage Vyāsa says: 'He is the creator and what is created; he is the doer and what is done' (*sa dhātā sa dheyaḥ sa kartā sa kāryam*).⁵ And Vaiṣampāyana praises Nārāyaṇa in similar fashion as the doer, the cause, and what is to be done (*sa kartā kāraṇam caiva kāryam*).⁶ Nārāyaṇa himself says to the sage Nārada: 'O Nārada, I am the doer, what is to be done, and also the cause.'⁷

In yet other contexts, the divine potency that indwells the world is so identified with the mental and emotional processes of the individual or with the individual as a whole that the very idea of mortal man as a separate and real entity is again threatened. Thus Nārāyaṇa tells the sage Mārkaṇḍeya: 'Desire, anger, joy, fear and delusion: know, O best (of brahmins) (that) these are all forms of mine.'⁸ As well, during Kṛṣṇa's mission to the Kaurava court to attempt to mediate peace, he revealed his real divine and wondrous form to awe all those present. There

1) Saṃtatiṣṭva pravṛttiṣu janma mṛtyuḥ punarbhavaḥ// Ādiparvan, 1.195.

2) Bhīṣmaparvan, 9.17.

3) *Ibid.*, 63.7.

4) Droṇaparvan, 172.64.

5) Āntiparvan, 327.89.

6) *Ibid.*, 331.43.

7) Ahaṃ kartā ca kāryam ca kāraṇam cāpi nārada/ *ibid.*, 326.45.

8) Kāmaṃ krodhaṃ ca harṣaṃ ca bhayaṃ mohaṃ tathaiva ca/
Mamaiva viddhi rūpāṇi sarvāṇyetāni sattama// Āraṇyakaparvan, 187.20.

then appeared thumb-sized (*aṅguṣṭhamātrās*) from his body the thirty gods, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, and *rākṣasas*, as well as the Andhakas and *Vṛṣṇis*, and significantly all five Pāṇḍava brothers. In this instance, the Pāṇḍavas, *Vṛṣṇis* and Andhakas are so completely swallowed up in the Supreme Being that scarcely any individual identity, let alone freedom, remains to them.¹

However, the great bulk of the Epic is preoccupied not at all with theological concerns but with mythology, didactic teachings, fables and parables, and with instruction on *dharma*. And in this literature the great Gods are portrayed not as indeterminate potencies pervading creation, but as thoroughly anthropomorphic individuals that are for ever personally intervening to arrange, direct and manoeuvre the broad course of events in the triple-world towards a desired end, normally the preservation of order and *dharma*. However, it is important to note, as they only predetermine the broad sweep of events, their effect is merely to restrict man's free-will, not to deny it. It is only exceptionally that the great Gods are portrayed as directly determining the finer details of affairs in the triple-world; and where this arises, more normally it is attributed to the Placer or the Ordainer.

Of the three great Gods, it is all too easy to dismiss Brahmā lightly, for he comes to be so heavily overshadowed in importance by *Īśa* and Viṣṇu. In the *Mahābhārata*, though, Brahmā is still intimately involved in the affairs of the triple-world; and in this regard has as good a claim to importance as Viṣṇu or *Īśa*.

While Brahmā's personality is not so well-developed as those of his later displacers, in the Epic he is no aloof, austere, and remote creator god. Mostly he is to be found in his Heaven of *brahmaloḥa*, or in his Hall of incomparable majesty and beauty where he often sits attended upon by the gods, as courtiers would attend upon a king;² and where proceedings are enlivened by the presence of *ṛṣis*, heroes, *apsarās* (singers), *gandharvas* (dancers) and so on.³ And just as kings proceed on

1) Udyogaparvan, 129.1-10.

2) e.g. Ādiparvan, 91.4, 203.3, Sabhāparvan, 4.34.

3) Sabhāparvan, 11.1-42.

tour, so does Brahmā periodically travel in the triple-world. Thus he visits and resides at *tīrthas*,¹ and erects a sacrificial pole at yet another *tīrtha*,² and performs grand sacrifices at yet other holy places.³ And during the fourth month of the Pāṇḍavas' stay in the kingdom of King Virāṭa, there took place a grand festival in honour of Brahmā.⁴ All in all, for a god who theoretically has nothing to do after creation, Brahmā's relationship with the triple-world is remarkably close; and more importantly his range of activities on behalf of the triple-world is extremely varied. However, most of Brahmā's activities on behalf of the triple-world do have one overriding concern: preserving the ascendancy of order and *dharma* in the triple-world.

Now, by origin Brahmā is the father or grandfather of all beings in the triple-world, including gods, demons and men. They are equally his children, and it is expected that he should be impartial towards them. King Parikṣit, for instance, is praised for being 'like Prajāpati (=Brahmā), ... impartial to all creatures.'⁵ In similar fashion, Arjuna praises Kṛṣṇa for his impartiality in the negotiations preceding open conflict: 'You are the supreme friend of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, O hero, as Prajāpati is of gods and *asuras*.'⁶ Brahmā himself recognises this obligation, but he also recognises that his impartiality must be limited by the need to maintain the overall ascendancy of *dharma*. Thus when the gods appeal to Brahmā for the destruction of the demon Tāraka, he agrees: 'I treat all creatures equally, (but) I cannot approve *adharma* here (in the triple-world).'⁷

Brahmā's normal method of procedure for resolving a threatening situation is to

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 81.1-5.

2) Ibid., 82.74-75.

3) Ibid., 85.16-17, Çalyaparvan, 37.5-10.

4) Virāṭaparvan, 12.12.

5) *samaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu prajāpatiriva*, Ādiparvan, 45.8

6) *Pāṇḍavānām kurūṇām ca bhavānparamakaḥ suhṛt/*
Surāṇāmasurāṇām ca yathā vīra prajāpatih// Udyogaparvan, 76.7.

7) *Samo ahaṁ sarvabhūtānāmadharmaṁ neha roçaye/* Anuçāsanaparvan, 84.3. Compare, too, the Çaivite myth of the triple-cities where Brahmā tells the defeated gods: 'Without a doubt (I treat) all creatures equally. But I declare to you that I will destroy the unrighteous.'

Ahaṁ hi tulyaḥ sarveṣāṁ bhūtānām nātra saṁçayaḥ/
Adharmikāstu hantavyā ityahaṁ prabravīmi vaḥ// Karṇaparvan, 24.34.

'ordain' or 'enjoin' that certain events should occur; or that the passage of Time (*kāla*) should bring certain events to pass. To express Brahmā's ordinances or injunctions, usually a derivative is used of the roots *dhā* 'to put, place, set, to appoint, establish, constitute, to make produce, generate, create'; *vi+dhā* 'to distribute, apportion, grant, bestow, to put in order, arrange, dispose, prepare, make ready, to ordain, direct, enjoin, fix, settle, appoint'; or *diṣ*, 'to point out, show, to promote, effect, accomplish, to direct, command'.¹ Through his commands, Brahmā directs the course of events in the triple-world by predetermining the principal or decisive actions where necessary; and to this extent Brahmā becomes an agent of fate for beings in the triple-world. This, though, does not reduce the beings of the triple-world, including men, to marionettes, devoid of all freedom of action for Brahmā only predetermines the principal events, not all events.

So, whenever there is a crisis in the triple-world - and they are very frequent - Brahmā is normally there to sort it out. And most of the crises that occur in the triple-world seem to occur within the framework of the eternal conflict of gods and men versus demons, *dharma* versus *adharma*. We have already seen that within this total dharmic framework, all participants have their legitimate place, and this includes even the demons though their *svadharma* has *adharma* as its end. However, a crisis can be brought about if any of the participants rise above the place allotted to them by Brahmā.

Very occasionally, as we have seen, man is the culprit, through his not unnatural desire to join the ranks of the gods by becoming immortal. But if overall order is to be preserved it is necessary for men to remain men, so that the sustenance of the gods is guaranteed in their conflict with demons and *adharma*. Brahmā's concern is the functioning of the whole system, not the welfare of one element to the exclusion of the others.

1) M. Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, pp.479, 513, 967.

More frequently it is the demons who rise above their allotted position and bring crisis to the triple-world. This may happen if a particularly fierce group of demons such as the Kāleyas - arise, thus requiring the intervention of a great God to put them back in their position. A crisis may also be brought about by Epic demons resorting to the performance of austerities and the accumulation of *tapas*. The standard pattern then seems to be that Brahmā must buy the demons off with a boon. The boon the demons invariably seek is immortality, although Brahmā always stops just short of this by conferring virtual, but not complete, invulnerability. Though Brahmā's actions may at times seem like 'criminal folly',¹ he actually has no choice, for if the demons were allowed to go on accumulating the power of *tapas*, this too would upset the order of the triple-world. Brahmā's boons, rash as they may seem, are a holding operation that provide time to find a way out of the mess. His refusal to grant outright immortality would alone indicate this.² However, it must be said that Brahmā can often be quite casual about finding a solution. All this can be seen in various myths.

During their exile in the forest, the ṛṣi Nārada recounts to the Pāṇḍavas the story of Unda and Upasunda, both grandsons of the great asura Hiranyakaśipu. Of great valour and terrible strength, these two did everything together, and were as one made into two (*dvidhaivakam yathā kṛtau*). Now, as they grew older they adopted the identical decision to conquer the universe. They therefore proceeded to the Vindhya mountains and there they practised dreadful austerities (*tatrogram tepatustapaḥ*):

Exhausting themselves with hunger and thirst, wearing hair braids and garments of bark, their bodies completely covered with filth, (and) subsisting on the wind, they existed (there). They offered their own flesh into the fire, stood on the tips of their toes, kept their arms raised, never blinked their eyes (and) kept their vows for a long time. Heated up for a long time by the

1) Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, p.193.

2) Under the right or appropriate circumstances Brahmā is prepared to grant immortality, as he does to the noble and virtuous mother of all cows, Surabhī. *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 82.34.

power of their austerities, the Vindhya mountains discharged smoke - it was indeed wondrous.¹

Witnessing the marvel, the gods became afraid and set out to obstruct their austerities. Again and again the gods tried to excite their desire with jewels and women, but without success. Then the gods conjured up illusions in which the family and kin of the two *asuras* called for help as they were attacked by a vicious *rākṣasa*. But unperturbed, the two *asuras* did not break their vow.²

Thereupon Brahmā himself went to the two *asuras* and offered a boon (*vareṇa chandayāmāsa*). They chose typical *asura* desires: 'If the Lord has grace for us, may we both become wise in magic, wise with weapons, strong, able to assume any shape at will (and) also immortal.'³ Brahmā agreed to all this save for immortality: 'You two have undertaken (these) austerities for the purpose of conquering the triple-world; for this reason, O Lords of the *Daityas*, I cannot grant your desire.'⁴ Brahmā bade them choose some other means of death similar to that of the Immortals (*amaraiḥ samam*). Unda and Upasunda therefore chose that they should be in no danger from any creature in the triple-world - save themselves. To this Brahmā agreed.

The immediate purpose was served for the two *asuras* abandoned their dreadful *tapas* and returned to their fellow demons. Donning expensive adornments and fineries in place of their ascetic garb, they quickly gave themselves up to revelry and drink. In house after house in the *daitya* city, cries were heard: 'Eat, enjoy always, make love, celebrate, drink and give.'⁵ After the revelry had run its course, the two

1) Kṣutpipāsāpariṣrāntau jaṭāvalkaladhārīṇau/
Malopacitasarvāṅgau vāyubhakṣau babhūvatuḥ//
Ātmamāṅsāni juhvantau pādāṅguṣṭhāgradhiṣṭhitau/
Ūrdhvabāhū cānimiṣau dīrghakālaṃ dhṛtavratau//
Tayostapaḥprabhāveṇa dīrghakālaṃ pratāpitau/
Dhūmaṃ pramuce vindhyastadadbhutamivābhavat// Ādiparvan, 201.7-9.

2) *Ibid.*, 201.4-15.

3) Māyāvidāvastravidau balīnau kāmārūpiṇau/
Ubhāvapyamarau syāvaḥ prasanno yadi nau prabhuḥ// *ibid.*, 201.19.

4) Trailokyavijayārthāya bhavadbhyāmāsthitaṃ tapaḥ/
Hetunānena daityendrau na vām kāmaṃ karomyaham// *ibid.*, 201.22.

5) Bhakṣyatām bhujyatām nityaṃ ramyatām gīyatāmiti/
Pīyatām dīyatām ceti vāca āsangrhe grhe// *ibid.*, 201.30.

set out to conquer the universe. Maddened with battle (*yuddhadurmadau*) they first proceeded to Heaven; but the gods, aware of Brahmā's boon, abandoned their abodes and went to the world of Brahmā. Then they conquered the hosts of *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, snakes, birds, creatures of the ocean and the tribes of barbarians. Finally, the demons determined on the destruction of the royal seers and brahmins who sacrificed to the gods and thereby fed their energy and strength. So that powerful pair of demons violently slew whosoever offered or officiated at sacrifice. Finding their curses of no avail, brahmins and ascetics (*tapasiddhāḥ*) abandoned their rules and practices and fled. Devoid of all religious observances, with agricultural activity at a standstill all the world became empty as though struck by Time.

Thereupon the many groups of seers and the gods placed their plight before the Grandfather. Brahmā reflected for a while on what was to be done, and then, designating or ordaining their destruction (*tayorvadhaṃ samuddiṣya*) he instructed Viṣvakarman (the divine artificer) to create a buxom woman who could be solicited (*srjyatām prārthanīyeha pramadeti*). Gathering from the triple-world everything that was beautiful, Viṣvakarman created a maid called Tilottamā whose body was perfect right down to the tiniest detail. Brahmā now bade her to entice the two demons with her body, but in such a way that when they saw her a quarrel would arise between them. As she departed the glances of all the great-souled gods fell abundantly on her body - except for the Grandfather.¹

After having conquered the triple-world, the two demons again gave themselves over to pleasures with women, food, and drink and fineries. During one such bout of revelry, Tilottamā appeared before them wearing a single garment in red. Now 'Their eyes red with intoxication from drinking the choicest liquor, they reeled when they saw her fine hips. Leaping up and quitting their seats, they went to where she stood; and ravished by lust they both desired her.'² And so, maddened (*mattau*) by

1) *Ibid.*, 202.1-203.30.

2) *Tau tu pītvā varam pānaṃ madaraktāntalocanau/*
Drṣṭvaiva tām varārohāṃ vyathitau sambabhūvatuḥ//

the boon they had received, by their own strength, their fineries and by the liquor they had drunk, they began to quarrel over her. Possessed by rage, they seized their terrible clubs and struck each other until they lay dead on the ground. Then Brahmā with the gods and seers came there. After rewarding Tilottamā with a boon, Brahmā repaired to his Heaven and put Indra in charge of the triple-world.¹

In other myths Brahmā again ordains the method for the resolution of a crisis in the triple-world. But typically, he delegates the actual work to a mortal (Arjuna) or another god (normally Viṣṇu, but also Skanda).

Thus, after Indra had taught Arjuna the mastery of all celestial weapons during his stay in Heaven, the king of gods asked for his *guru's* fee. Indra requested that Arjuna should destroy his *dānava* enemies called the Nivātakavacas who numbered thirty million and lived in a city by the ocean. To achieve this deed, Arjuna was given Indra's own celestial chariot driven by his divine charioteer Mātali, an impenetrable suit of armour, and the great conch shell Devadatta with which Ṣakra had conquered the worlds. Now Arjuna and Mātali quickly approached the *dānava* city with the noise of their chariot roaring. Arjuna circled the city blowing a challenge from the great conch Devadatta. Thereupon the Nivātakavacas poured out of their city in their thousands; and there ensued a long and furious battle between Arjuna and the demons with much resort to magic and wizardry. Indeed, Mātali had never seen such a battle before, even between the gods and demons.

At the culmination of the battle, the *dānavas* became invisible and resorted to dropping mountains down until the chariot of Arjuna and Mātali was enclosed by piled up mountains. Even Arjuna was troubled (*agacchaṃ paramāmārtiṃ*) and frightened (*bhītaṃ*); but Mātali urged him to hurl the thunderbolt weapon (*vajramāstram*). And with this mighty weapon, Arjuna shattered the mountains and slew the *dānavas*. Laughing, Mātali agreed that not even the gods had the prowess (*vīryaṃ*) of Arjuna.

Tāvutpatyāśanaṃ hitvā jagmaturyatra sā sthitā/

Ubhau ca kāmāsaṃmattāvubhau prārthayataṇṇa tām// *ibid.*, 204.11-12.

1) *Ibid.*, 204.1-24.

To the sound of the wailing *dānava* women, Arjuna and Mātali thundered into the conquered city. Admiring that choicest of cities (*nagaramuttamam*), of wondrous appearance, which he thought excelled even the city of the king of gods, Arjuna wondered why the gods did not live there. Mātali explained that this had indeed once been the city of Indra but the celestials had been expelled from it by the Nivātakavacas. In former times, it seemed, these demons had performed very severe austerities (*tapastaptvā mahattīvrām*) and had received from Brahmā the boon of living in this city and being safe against the gods in battle (*devebhyaṣcābhayaṃ yudhi*). When an anxious Indra approached the Self-Existent God, Brahmā explained what he had ordained or directed in this matter (*diṣṭamatra*): 'You yourself shall be their end (but) in another body, O slayer of Vṛtra.' As Arjuna was Indra's own son, the king of gods had given him his weapons to slay those whom the gods could not slay.²

However, Arjuna's work for the gods was not yet done for on the way back to Heaven they came upon another great city which had the unusual power of moving at will (*kāmacaram*). Mātali explained that formerly there were two *asura* women called Pulomā and Kālahā who performed the severest austerities (*ceratuḥ paramaṃ tapaḥ*) for a thousand years of the gods. Then the Self-Existent (*svayaṃbhūḥ*) God came to them and as their boon they chose that their progeny should be inviolable (*avadhyatām*) to gods, *rākṣasas* and snakes. And this delightful sky-going city (*ramaṇīyaṃ puraṃ cedam khacaram*), impregnable to gods, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *rākṣasas*, snakes and other *asuras*, had been created for them by Brahmā himself. In this city called Hirāṇyapura, which was endued with the excellence of all desires, free from sorrow, (and) full of health, these *asuras* lived, always joyful and without any desires.³

But even demons who are happy and without desires are still demons, and by

1) Bhavitāntastvamevaiṣāṃ dehenānyena vṛtrahan// Āraṇyakaparvan, 169.31.

2) *Ibid.*, 165.1-169.32. 3) *Ibid.*, 170.1-12.

definition must be destroyed by the gods. Therefore, Mātali related, Brahmā had formerly determined that a human would be their death.¹

Arjuna now bade Mātali turn the chariot so he could also despatch these evil god-haters (*pāpāḥ ... suradvīṣaḥ*). Again there took place a wondrous battle with much magic and wizardry as the sky-going city darted hither and thither. But with his bow and arrow and divine weapons, Arjuna shot the city out of the skies, and it fell broken on the Earth. Grounded, the *dānavas* attacked anew, but Arjuna, though sorely pressed and struck by great fear, destroyed those *dānavas* with his mighty Raudra weapon. Mātali and even Indra were awed by Arjuna's feat that could not be accomplished by the gods themselves.²

In the *Mahābhārata*'s version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Brahmā can be seen taking a more active role in guiding the course of events towards the preservation of *dharma*, although again he delegates much of the work, especially to Viṣṇu. In this version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is related that Prajāpati (=Brahmā), the Self-Existent creator of all the worlds had a beloved mind-born son called Pulastya, who begot a son, Vaiṣravaṇa Kubera, on a cow. But Kubera chose to favour his grandfather over his father. Greatly angered, Pulastya created another son called Viṣṇavas to counter Kubera. In the meantime Prajāpati had bestowed on Kubera immortality, the lordship of riches (*dhaneṣatvam*), the guardianship of one quarter of the universe, and for his capital the island of Laṅkā with its multitudes of *rākṣasas*.

Now, realising that his father was angry with him, Kubera gave three *rākṣasa* women to him as servants. Pleased with them, Pulastya gave them the boon of having sons like the World Guardians. It was on these *rākṣasa* women that Viṣṇavas - who now viewed his brother Kubera with anger - begot Rāvaṇa, his brothers and sister; and they were thus grandchildren of Brahmā the Self-Existent creator of all the worlds.³

1) Mānuṣo mṛtyureteṣāṃ nirdiṣṭo brahmaṇā purā// *ibid.*, 170.12.

2) *Ibid.*, 170.14-68.

3) *Ibid.*, 258.11.

All, by nature, were fairly typical *rākṣasas*, save for Vibhīṣaṇa who was superior to all in beauty, a protector of *dharma* (*dharmagoptā*) and who delighted in ritual (*kriyāratiḥ*). By contrast his brother Khara hated brahmins and fed on flesh; while Çūrpanakhā was fierce and obstructed seers. Kumbhakarṇa excelled all in strength, was skilled in magic, addicted to battle, and a fierce Night-Walker. Ten-headed Rāvaṇa, the eldest of all, was of mighty power, prowess, courage and valour. Nevertheless, all were heroes who knew the *Vedas* (*sarve vedavidāḥ*) and performed their vows completely (*sarve sucaritavratāḥ*); for, as we have noted above, even *rākṣasas* have their legitimate place within the total system of *dharma*.¹

However, through their rivalry with their uncle Kubera, they determined on the performance of austerities. Ten-headed Rāvaṇa stood on one foot for a thousand years, in amidst five fires, while living on wind alone, and fully concentrated. Kumbhakarṇa slept on the ground only, and was controlled in diet and vows. Vibhīṣaṇa undertook severe austerities (*ātiṣṭhattīvrāṇ tapāḥ*) all the time and ate one withered leaf only. Khara and Çūrpanakhā guarded them all the while. Now, after a full thousand years, ten-headed Rāvaṇa cut off a head (*çiraçchittvā*) and offered it into the sacrificial fire (*juhetyagnau*). This ultimate self-mortification was finally enough for Brahmā, who now appeared to them: 'I am pleased with you; (now) cease (and) choose boons my children. Excepting immortality alone, which is not ordained, choose what you wish.'² Rāvaṇa chose that he should never suffer defeat from *gandharvas*, gods, *asuras*, snakes, *kiṃnaras* or ghosts (*bhūta*). And Brahmā ordained this so (*tathā tadvihitaṃ mayā*); only from men would there be danger. With this Rāvaṇa was satisfied 'for the foolish man-eater despised humans.'³ By contrast Vibhīṣaṇa chose that even when he was subject to the greatest misfortune (*paramāpad*), *adharma* should never enter him. Significantly, in this special case

1) *Ibid.*, 259.13.

2) *Prīto asmi vo nivartadhvaṃ varānvṛṇta putrakāḥ/*
Yadyadiṣṭamṛte tvekamamaratvaṃ tathāstu tat// *ibid.*, 259.22.

3) Avamene hi durbuddhirmanuṣyānpuruṣāḍakāḥ// *ibid.*, 259.27.

where the demon was palpably not a threat to the ascendancy of *dharma*, Brahmā was prepared to grant immortality: 'Although your birth was from the womb of a *rākṣasī*, harasser of your enemies, (as) your mind delights not in *adharma*, I grant you immortality.'

Having received his boon, Rāvaṇa quickly conquered the God of Riches in battle and expelled him from Laṅkā. Kubera then retired to Mount Gandhamādana followed by his *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, as well as *rākṣasas* and *kimpuruṣas*; and also his *dharma*-minded half brother Vibhīṣaṇa. Kubera placed Vibhīṣaṇa at the head of the armies of his *yakṣa* and *rākṣasa* followers. The remaining *rākṣasas* and *piṣācas* now made Rāvaṇa their king; and the power-mad (*balotkataḥ*) *rākṣasa*, who could assume any form and travel the skies at will, brought fear to the gods (*devānāṃ bhayamādadhat*) and took from them their treasure.²

All the gods and seers then sought refuge (*ṣaraṇaṃ gatāḥ*) with Brahmā. Agni spoke for the gods:

The powerful ten-headed son of Viṣṇavas was formerly made inviolable by you, our Lord, with the gift of a boon. The mighty (*rākṣasa*) oppresses all creatures with his injurious acts. Therefore, O Lord, save us, for there is no other saviour.³

Brahmā replied that a solution was already in process:

O radiant Fire, he cannot be defeated in battle by gods or *asuras*. (Yet) it has been ordained in his case what is to be done for his complete suppression. For this purpose four-armed Viṣṇu, the best of warriors, has descended (to earth) on my orders; he will perform this deed.⁴

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- 1) Yasmādrākṣasayonau te jātasyāmitrakaṛṇa/
Nādharme ramate buddhiramaratvaṃ dadāmi te// *ibid.*, 259.31.
 - 2) *Ibid.*, 259.39-40.
 - 3) Yaḥ sa viṣṇavasah putro daṣagrīvo mahābalaḥ/
Avadhyo varadānena kṛto bhagavatā purā//
Sa bādhat prajāḥ sarvā viprakārairmahābalaḥ/
Tato nastrātu bhagavannānyastrātā hi vidyate// *ibid.*, 260.2-3.
 - 4) Na sa devāsuraiḥ cākyo yuddhe jetuṃ vibhāvaso/
Vihitaṃ tatra yatkāryamabhitastasya nigrahe//
Tadarthamavatīrṇo asau manniyogāccaturbhujah/
Viṣṇuḥ praharatām ṣreṣṭhaḥ sa karmaitatkariṣyati// *ibid.*, 260.4-5.

Thereupon Brahmā commanded the gods: 'Be born on Earth together with all the hosts of gods. On bears and monkeys, you all must beget heroic sons - mighty and able to assume any form - to be Viṣṇu's assistants.' Immediately the celestials descended to earth with varying portions of themselves (*bhāgānubhāgena*).

Having ordained the birth of Rāma and his helpers, Brahmā proceeded to ordain the means by which they would be brought into conflict with Rāvaṇa and his *rākṣasas*. To achieve this, Brahmā commanded a *gandharvī* woman named Dundubhī to take birth in the world of men as the hunch-backed woman Mantharā. Brahmā then enlightened her as to what she was to do (*yatkāryaṃ yathā yathā*) to make successful the purpose and design of the gods (*devakāryārthasiddhaye*). And, concludes the narrator, 'Thus did the Lord, who promotes the welfare of the worlds, dispose it all.'²

At the bidding of Brahmā, Mantharā now became intent on fomenting a feud in the house of Rāma. The opportunity soon came, for Rāma's father, King Daśaratha, deeming himself advanced in years, decided to consecrate his eldest son Rāma as heir that very night. But hearing of this, Mantharā informed King Daśaratha's second wife Kaikeyī, emphasising the ill-fortune it boded for her. Donning all her jewelery and finery, Kaikeyī approached the king, and with winning ways reminded him of an old promise to her of a boon.

King Daśaratha agreed to grant her whatever she wished, but was mortified and rendered speechless when she chose that her son Bharata be consecrated as heir and that Rāma be banished to the forest. When Rāma heard, he said 'the king shall be true' (*rājā satyo bhavatviti*), and he departed for the forest in the garb of an ascetic, accompanied by his brother Lakṣmaṇa and his wife Sītā.³

Now, of course, forests were the haunt not just of ascetics, but of man-eating

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- 1) Sarvairdevagaṇaiḥ sārddhaṃ sambhavadhvaṃ mahītale//
Viṣṇoḥ sahāyānrkṣīṣu vānarīṣu ca sarvaṇaḥ/
Janayadhvaṃ sūtānvīrāṅkāmarūpabalānvitān// *ibid.*, 260.6-8.
2) Evaṃ vidhāya tatsarvaṃ bhagavāṅllokabhāvanah/ *ibid.*, 260.14.
3) *Ibid.*, 261.1-28.

rākṣasas as well, and it was only to be expected that Rāma would come into conflict with them. And soon there occurred a great quarrel with Rāvaṇa's brother, King Khara of Janasthāna, which was caused by Rāvaṇa's sister, Çūrpanakhā. In order to protect the ascetics from the man-eaters, Rāma, who was devoted to *dharma*, slew 14,000 of the *rākṣasas*, including Khara. He also mutilated Çūrpanakhā, cutting off her nose and lip.

Çūrpanakhā sought refuge with her brother on Laṅkā; and when Rāvaṇa saw his blood-stained and mutilated sister, he ground his teeth (*dantairdantānupaspr̥ṣan*) in rage and flames of fire burst forth from the apertures of his body (*srotobhyastejaso arciṣaḥ niṣcerur*).¹

Determined on revenge, ten-headed Rāvaṇa commanded a fellow *rākṣasa* called Mārīca to take on the form of a deer with jewelled antlers and with gems speckled on its hide. When Sītā saw this enticing sight she would certainly send Rāma in pursuit, allowing Rāvaṇa the opportunity to abduct her.

From Brahmā's point of view, all was now perfectly set for a clash between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. But just to make sure events continued along the desired course, Brahmā seems to have intervened yet again; for when Mārīca appeared in the guise of a deer, Sītā was 'urged on by ordinance' (*vidhicoditā*) when she sent Rāma in pursuit.² In this context, *vidhi* or ordinance can only refer to one of Brahmā's guiding ordinances.

The remainder of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, which the *Mahābhārata* provides in outline, is too well known to need repeating. Suffice it to say that events do take the course that Brahmā desired. Sītā is abducted and held prisoner in Rāvaṇa's island fortress of Laṅkā. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, with their monkey army, do rescue her, and destroy Rāvaṇa and his *rākṣasa* hordes in the process.

At the end, though, Brahmā intervenes in one more vital fashion to ensure that events take an appropriate course. With the death of Rāvaṇa and the defeat of his

1) *Ibid.*, 261.42-50.

2) *Ibid.*, 262.11-13.

army, Sita is brought to her victorious husband. But Rāma rejects her, for knowing the decision of the *dharma* (*jānandharmaviniṣṭayam*) he could not maintain even for a moment a woman who had been in another man's hands: 'Virtuous or not, Maithilī (=Sita) I cannot enjoy you now, just as an oblation has been licked by a dog.' The gods Vāyu, Agni and Varuṇa all confirm her innocence, but Brahmā intervenes decisively by explaining how he had provided for the safeguarding of Sītā's virtue:

Then Sītā was abducted by that evil-minded one for the purpose of his own death. And she was protected by me through the curse of Nalakūbara. He had formerly been told that if he enjoyed any woman sexually who desired him not, his body would for certain burst into a hundred pieces. Have no doubt about this. Receive her back, glorious man.²

Therefore in the *Mahābhārata*'s version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, from the point of view of the participants the 'hand of fate' can be seen at work from beginning to end guiding the course of events. But throughout the hand of fate is revealed as no more nor less than the injunctions of Brahmā, even though much of the actual hard work is performed by Viṣṇu in the guise of Rāma.³ And whereas the hand of fate is normally seen as beyond all rhyme and reason, Brahmā's boons and ordinances always have as their ultimate purpose the preservation of order and *dharma* in the triple-world, even if at times they seem capricious and foolish. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* the purpose of Brahmā's boons and injunctions is at all times the destruction of Rāvaṇa, and thus of *adharma*. However, though the final result is predetermined, it does not follow that the actions of the principal participants in the drama are completely

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- 1) Suvṛttāmasuvṛttāṃ vāpyahaṃ tvāmadya maithilī/
Notsahe paribhogāya ṣvāvalīḍhaṃ haviryathā// *ibid.*, 275.13.
 - 2) Vadhārthamātmanastena hṛtā sītā durātmanā/
Nalakūbaraṇāpena rakṣā cāsyāḥ kṛtā mayā//
Yadi hyakāmāmāsevetstriyamanyāmapī dhruvam/
Ṣatadhāsyā phaleddeha ityuktaḥ so abhavatpurā//
Nātra ṣaṅkā tvayā kāryā pratīcchemāṃ mahādyute/ *ibid.*, 275.32-34.
 - 3) Also compare how Brahmā 'ordains' (vihitaṃ) the means for the destruction of the *rākṣasa* Cārvāka (Ṣāntiparvan, 39.22-46); and the terrible demon Tāraka (Anuṣāsanaparvan, 84.1-17).

controlled by the effect of Brahmā's injunctions. Brahmā's method of operation is not to exercise his divine powers to directly dictate the course of events, but to manipulate and manoeuvre events that occur independently of him. Indeed, it should be recalled that the whole drama turns upon the *rākṣasas* having the freedom of choice to follow the path of ascetism, and thus challenge the order of the triple-world.

A more immediate example of where Brahmā's injunctions serve to guide the course of events is provided by the central story-line of the *Mahābhārata* itself. However, Brahmā's part in predetermining the course of events in the core drama of the *Mahābhārata* is much less important than the part played by Viṣṇu.

In the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, as we have it, the central story line is set within the framework of the eternal cosmic conflict between gods and demons. However, this cosmic theme seems to have become conflated and confused with a more earthly theme of probably Vaiṣṇavite origins, namely that the *kṣatriyas* as a *varṇa* have become too powerful and uncontrolled, and must be destroyed. The implication of the first theme is that demonic *kṣatriyas* must be destroyed; the implication of the second is that all *kṣatriyas* must be killed off.

The interweaving of these two themes - assuredly of separate origin - can be seen in the very first book of the *Mahābhārata* where Vaiṣampāyana explains to King Janamejaya the origin of the great conflict. Vaiṣampāyana begins with the mighty deeds of the warrior brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya,¹ a story which the brahmin redactors of the *Mahābhārata* were obviously fond of.² Vaiṣampāyana recounts that Rāma, son of Jamadagni had formerly emptied the earth of *kṣatriyas* twenty-one times over and had then performed *tapas* on Mount Mahendra. However, with the earth free of *kṣatriya* men, the *kṣatriya* women approached the brahmins longing for their wombs

1) Significantly in later mythology Rāma came to be viewed as an incarnation of Viṣṇu; although in the *Mahābhārata* he is in fact a worshipper of Śiva. *Kaṇṇaparvan*, 24.131-155.

2) See *Çāntiparvan*, 49.1-79; and *Āçvamedhikaparvan*, 29.1-22.

(*garbhārthīnyo*). And then

Brahmins of fixed vows united with them at their proper season, tiger among men, not from desire, (and) likewise not out of season. Thus *kṣatriya* men (were begotten) on *kṣatriya* women by ascetic brahmins. ... (And) this race, endowed with a very long life, prospered with *dharma*. Then all four *varṇas* existed with brahmins the highest.¹

In this manner a new and righteous race of *kṣatriyas* was produced by brahmin fathers on *kṣatriya* mothers.² Thereafter men only went to their wives at their season and not out of desire; and even animals did the same. Their offspring lived for hundreds and thousands of years and were devoted to the vows of *dharma* (*dharmavrataparāyaṇāḥ*). And while the *kṣatriyas* ruled over the earth in accordance with *dharma*, all the classes headed by the brahmins attained the greatest joy. As the *kṣatriyas* were devoted to *dharma*, Indra sent rain at the right time and place. Women and cows gave birth at the right time; and trees bore fruits and flowers at all seasons. And all classes of men fulfilled their own duties fully and properly. At that time the *dharma* was in no way diminished (*dharmo na hrasate kvacit*).

However, into this Golden Age (*kṛtayuge*) a new *kṣatriya* menace appeared when demons defeated in Heaven began to be born on Earth as kings: 'For at that time the *daityas* had been repeatedly conquered in battle by the gods, and fallen from their lordly state they took birth here on earth.'³ Desiring to be gods among men (*devatvamicchanto mānuṣeṣu*) these demons were born in such numbers that the Earth could no longer support herself. Even worse than their numbers was their behaviour:

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- 1) Tābhiḥ saha samāpeturbrahmaṇāḥ saṃcitavratāḥ/
 Rtvāṛtau naravyāghra na kāmānnāṛtau tathā// (6)
 Evaṃ tadbrahmaṇaiḥ kṣatram kṣatriyāsu tapasvibhiḥ/
 Jātampṛdhyata dharmeṇa sudīrghenāyusānvitam/
 Catvāro api tadā varṇā babhūvurbrahmaṇottarāḥ// (8) Ādiparvan, 58.6 & 8.
- 2) Although logically we must presume that the first twenty mixed races so produced fell victim to Rāma's wrath. Another unstated assumption would seem to be that, with the destruction of the old *kṣatriya* race and the birth of the new mixed race, the cycle of the four ages starts again.
- 3) Adityairhi tadā daityā bahuḥ nirjitā yudhi/
 Aṣṭvāryādbhṛāṇṇāṣṭvāpi sambabhūvuh kṣitāvīha// Ādiparvan, 58.26.

Powerful, prideful, bearing various shapes, they roamed over the earth to the boundaries of the ocean, crushing their enemies. ... Spreading fear, and destroying all the hosts of created beings, they wandered the entire earth in their hundreds and thousands, O king. Violating everywhere the great seers in their hermitages, they were hostile to brahmins, drunk with power, and intoxicated with strong drink.¹

And so the earth was tormented (*pīḍyamānāḥ*) and forcefully occupied by the *dānavas* (*ākrāntāṃ dānavairbalāt*). Stricken by her burden (*bhārārtā*) and afflicted with fear (*bhayapīḍitā*) the earth now sought refuge (*jagāma śaraṇam*) with the Grandfather.

Thereupon Brahmā directed (*ādideṣa*) the gods, *gandharvas* and *apsarās* to be born on Earth: 'For their suppression you must each be born on Her with portions (of yourselves) to throw off Her burden.'² Then all the gods approached Nārāyaṇa, and Indra bade him also to descend with a portion of himself (*aṅḡṇāvatarasveti*) for the purifying (*śodhanāya*) of the Earth. So, with portions of themselves (*aṅḡṇaiḥ svair*), all the divine beings were born amongst the lineages of brahmin and royal seers for the destruction of the enemies of the gods (*amarārivināśāya*) and the welfare of all the worlds (*sarvalokahitāya*).³ In due time, at Brahmā's behest, all the celestials became partly incarnate on Earth.⁴

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- 1) *Vīryavanto avaliptāste nānārūpadharā mahīm/*
Imāṃ sāgaraparyantāṃ pariyurarimardanāḥ// (31)
Trāsayanto vinighnantastānsthānbhūtagaṇāṅḡca te/
Viceruḥ sarvato rājanmahīm ṣaṭasahasraṇaḥ// (33)
Āṣramasthānmaharṣīṅḡca dharṣayantastatastataḥ/
Abrahmaṇyā vīryamadā mattā madabalena ca// (34) *ibid.*, 58.31 & 33-34.
 - 2) *Asyā bhūmernirasitūḥ bhāraṃ bhāḡaiḥ prthakprthak/*
Asyāmeva prasūyadhvaṃ virodhāyeti cābravīt// *ibid.*, 58.46.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, 58.49-59.4. This cosmic setting, though, is presumably a later addition for some of the divine portions are born on the wrong side if the struggle between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas is a *de facto* one between gods and demons. On the Kaurava side Karna is born of the sun (*Ādiparvan*, 61.89), Droṇa of Brhaspati (*Ādiparvan*, 61.63), Aṣvatthāman of Mahādeva (*Ādiparvan*, 61.66-67), Bhīṣma of the Vasus (*Ādiparvan*, 61.68-69), Kṛpa of the Rudras (*Ādiparvan*, 61.71), and Kṛtavarman of the Maruts (*Ādiparvan*, 61.75). There are other anomalies, too: an army of *rākṣasas* under Ghaṭotkāca fights on the Pāṇḍava side; and in the personal combat between Arjuna and Karna the *Ādityas* are said to favour Karna (*Karna-parvan*, 63.39). It should also be noted that King Pūru, lineal descendant of the Pāṇḍavas, is begotten by King Yayāti on Ṣarmiṣṭhā, the daughter of Vṛṣaparvan, the king of the demons. (*Ādiparvan*, 78.10-11, 80.26-27) This would seem to make the Pāṇḍavas distantly related to the demons!
 - 4) The only other direct part Brahmā seems to play in the central story line of the *Mahābhārata* occurs when Arjuna and Karna finally pair off for personal combat. All the celestials duly troop along to see the spectacle, and Brahmā, the self-born lord of creatures (*prajāpatiḥ ... svayambhuvam*) also came there along with

Related versions of this cosmic framework are to be found in the *Sabhāparvan* and *Āraṇyakaparvan*; but significantly, in these Viṣṇu has risen far above being just Brahmā's faithful lieutenant in the overthrow of *adharma*, for he has now subsumed Brahmā's position as principal strategist and commander of the gods. Indeed, Viṣṇu comes to play a role that is as important or even more important than that of Brahmā in resolving the many crises that afflict the triple-world. While Viṣṇu, to his devotees, is creator, preserver and destroyer, it is in his function as preserver of the ordered functioning of the triple-world that Viṣṇu receives most attention in the Epic.

After the creation of the triple-world, Viṣṇu too is intimately concerned with laying down the order by which it should function. Thus for the gods he ordains their respective jurisdictions (*adhikāro*), or areas of authority, for the welfare of the worlds (*lokaḥitam*);¹ and for men he ordains not just the Way of Action (*pravṛttidharma*) with all its complexities of dharmic duty, but also the Way of Renunciation (*nivṛttidharma*).² According to the *Mokṣadharmā*, Viṣṇu then himself chose the Way of Renunciation.³ This may merely reflect the bias of a text principally concerned with liberation, for in practice Viṣṇu closely superintends the working of all aspects of the triple-world, and is ever ready to intervene where the forces of *adharma* threaten. Compared to Brahmā, though, Viṣṇu is much more personally involved in the resolution of the crises that periodically rack the triple-world; especially when he takes form on earth as an *avatāra* to directly deal

Īcāna (Çiva). Now the lesser gods were uncertain as to the outcome, and with Indra as their spokesman, they requested Brahmā that both should be equally victorious. However, Brahmā and Īcāna both reply that Arjuna who was intelligent, brave, powerful, devout and who knew the entire science of archery, would certainly be victorious. Those ancient and best of seers Nara and Nārāyaṇa were rulers who could not be ruled; they were fearless enemy-burners. However, Brahmā and Çiva agreed that the heroic and brave Karna should attain the highest world, where he should be highly honoured along with Droṇa and Bhīṣma. But the two Kṛṣṇa's would be victorious. (*Kaṇḍaparvan*, 63.30-56) However, in this instance Brahmā seems not so much to ordain the course of events, as to state an indisputable fact: Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa could not be overcome.

1) *Çāntiparvan*, 327.33-60.

2) *Ibid.*, 327.2-3.

3) *Ibid.*, 327.2 & 88.

with the forces of *adharma*. But his method of approach is much the same. Viṣṇu does not directly determine the course of events through use of his supernatural powers, but instead guides, manipulates, and manoeuvres the flow of events which by origin are independent of his control. To this extent Viṣṇu too becomes more or less an agent of destiny, but not one that totally destroys the free-will of mortals.

As preserver, Viṣṇu spends much of his time trying to contain the disorder and evil that he brings forth as creator. In Vaiṣṇavite mythology the forces of *adharma* appear immediately creation commences, with the appearance of the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, whose creation is intentional in some myths and unintentional in others. Whatever the case, Viṣṇu recognises the danger they constitute to the order of the triple-world and sets about their destruction.

In the *Āraṇyakaparvan* version of this myth, the ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya recounts how at the end of the cosmic age Viṣṇu sleeps alone on the coils of the gigantic snake Ṣeṣa, afloat on the primordial waters. And while he sleeps, a lotus emerges from his navel in which the Grandfather Brahmā, the preceptor of the world was born. Now this wondrous spectacle was seen by the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha, whose prior existence is simply assumed in this myth. After recovering from their astonishment, the great pair began to terrify (*vitṛāsayetām*) Brahmā. Repeatedly frightened by the pair, Brahmā shook the lotus stalk until Viṣṇu awoke and, taking advantage of their insolent pride in their own might, engineered their destruction. Although the demons claim they abide by the eternal precepts of *dharma*, their behaviour towards the creative demiurge Brahmā is clearly demonic and promotive of *adharma*. Because of their unequalled power, Viṣṇu deemed their destruction necessary for the welfare of the world. Seeing those two most powerful *dānavas*, Viṣṇu said: 'I wish you welcome, O powerful ones. I shall give you two a most excellent boon, for I am pleased.' Laughing at Viṣṇu, those powerful *asuras* both answered: 'You yourself, O God, must

1) Dṛṣṭvā tāvabraviddevaḥ svāgataṃ vāṃ mohābalau/
Dadāni vāṃ varaṃ cṛeṣṭhaṃ prītirhi mama jāyate// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 194.18.

choose from us (for) we two are granters of boons, O best of Gods. We two shall grant you a boon; therefore ask without hesitation.¹ The offer pleased Viṣṇu who said:

I accept your boon, O heroes, and (there is) a boon I desire; for you two are both endued with power (and) no man is your equal. For the welfare of the world, I wish to obtain this desire: that the two of you, who are truly powerful, should be killed by me.²

To this awesome request for their own destruction, Madhu and Kaiṭabha agreed:

We two have never spoken an untruth before, not even in jest let alone otherwise. Know that we two are devoted to truth and *dharma*, O best of persons. There are none who equal us in strength, beauty, valour, equanimity, *dharma*, austerity, giving, and in character, courage and self-control. A great disaster has come upon us, O Keçava! (But) make good your word, for Time is hard to overcome.³

However, the demons did not capitulate that easily for they requested boons of Viṣṇu: that they should only be slain where space was uncovered (*anāvṛte asminnākāṣe vadham*); and that they should become sons (*putra*) of Viṣṇu. To this the great God agreed, but reflect as he might he could see no spot on heaven or earth that was uncovered. Then Viṣṇu beheld his own uncovered loins (*svakavanāvṛtavūrū dṛṣṭvā*), and thereupon cut off the heads of the two demons with his discus.⁴ So, with a piece of verbal hair-splitting worthy of Indra, Viṣṇu finally achieved their destruction.

In the *Çāntiparvan* version of this myth, we have already seen how Viṣṇu intentionally creates these two demons, from the qualities of darkness and ignorance, inside the primeval lotus in which Brahmā had taken birth. Now, true to

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- 1) *Āvāṃ varaya deva tvaṃ varadau svaḥ surottama/
Dātārau svo varaṃ tubhyaṃ tadbravīhyavicārayan//* *ibid.*, 194.20.
2) *Pratigrhṇe varaṃ vīrāvīpsitaṣṭaḥ varo mama/
Yuvāṃ hi vīryasāṃpannau na vāmasti samah pumān//
Vadhyatvamupagacchetāṃ mama satyaparākramau/
Etadicchāmyaḥ kāmāṃ prāptuṃ lokahitāya vai//* *ibid.*, 194.21-22.
3) *Anṛtaṃ noktapūrvāṃ nau svaiṣṇvapi kṛto anyathā/
Satye dharme ca nīratau viddhyāvāṃ puruṣottama//
Bale rūpe ca vīrye ca çame ca na samo asti nau/
Dharme tapasi dāne ca çīlasattvadameṣu ca//
Upaplavo mahānasmānupātvartata keçava/
Uktaṃ pratikuruṣva tvaṃ kālo hi duratikramah//* *ibid.*, 194.23-25.
4) *ibid.*, 194.11-30.

their natures, when the two demons saw Brahmā busy creating the four *Vedas*, they seized them and plunged into the primeval waters. The worlds became covered with darkness. For the return of the *Vedas*, and the salvation of creation, Viṣṇu took on a form having a splendid horse-head (*kṛtvā hayaṣiraḥ ṣubhram*), and entered the infernal regions where he performed the highest yoga (*yogaṃ paramamāsthitaḥ*) and uttered forth the sound *AUM*. Hearing that sound the two demons threw down the *Vedas* and rushed towards where the sound came from. As they did so the horse-headed Viṣṇu took up the *Vedas*, and returned them to Brahmā. Then he resumed his own nature reclining in yogic sleep on the great snake adrift on the primeval waters. Now, when the two demons found the *Vedas* gone after they had failed to find the source of the sound, they returned to the primeval lotus from which they had been born. Seeing the body of the reclining Viṣṇu those foremost of demons (*dānavendrau*) roared out great laughter (*mahāhāsamamuñcatām*). Thereupon Viṣṇu awoke, and realising that those two *asuras* intended to do battle with him (*yuddhārthinau tu vijñāya*), Nārāyaṇa slew them both for the advantage of Brahmā (*brahmaṇopacitīm*).¹ In this myth, then, Viṣṇu must rescue his creation from the demonic forces of ignorance and darkness which he himself has let loose; though in this instance the demons behave more as demons are expected to behave, and Viṣṇu behaves more as we expect a god to behave.

While Madhu and Kaiṭabha disappear from the scene quickly, in another myth they leave a dangerous legacy to the stability of the triple-world in the form of their lustrous and glorious son (*mahātejas ... mahādyutiḥ*) called Dhundhu. To revenge himself on the gods, Dhundhu, like so many demons, took to the path of *tapas*, performing great austerities (*sa tapo atapyata mahan*). Thus he stood on one foot only, and became so emaciated that he was held together by veins alone (*kṛṣo dhamanisaṃtataḥ*). This pleased (*prīto*) Brahmā who appeared and proffered a boon. Dhundhu chose that he be inviolable (*avadhyo*) to gods, *dānavas*, *yakṣas*, snakes,

1) Čāntiparvan, 335.24-64.

gandharvas and *rākṣasas*. To this Brahmā agreed, presumably because no mention was made of mortals, and thus it did not constitute the normal demonic demand for immortality. Having obtained this boon, the mighty and valorous (*mahāvīrya-parākramah*) Dhundhu recalled the killing of his parents and rushed at (*upādravat*) Viṣṇu. Then 'intolerantly Dhundhu defeated gods and *gandharvas*, (and) repeatedly chastised the gods and Viṣṇu severely.'¹

With the gods, including Viṣṇu, conquered, Dhundhu repaired to the desert near the hermitage of Uttānka, and there he hid himself under the sands. And 'for the destruction of the worlds, he resorted to the power of his austerities, (and) lay there in the vicinity of Uttānka's *āṣrama*, breathing flames of fire.'²

While Dhundhu was intent on the destruction of the triple-world, the sage Uttānka performed very difficult *tapas* (*tapo stapyatsuduṣṭcaram*) for many years to propitiate Viṣṇu. Pleased (*prītaḥ*) Viṣṇu appeared, and on seeing the great God, Uttānka satisfied him with assorted praises (*tuṣṭāva vividhaiḥ stavaiḥ*). Even more pleased, Viṣṇu bade him choose a boon. Uttānka (loyal devotee that he was) chose that his mind should always be on *dharma*, truth and self-control, and that he should always be devoted to Viṣṇu (*bhaktiā tvayi nityam*).

Viṣṇu agreed, but he also took the opportunity to recruit this loyal devotee to help do what the gods could not do: rid the triple-world of the threat Dhundhu constituted to its ordered existence. To the seer, Viṣṇu pronounced:

A *yoga* shall become manifest (to you), yoked with which you shall perform a great deed for the gods and the triple-world. A great *asura* named Dhundhu is performing terrifying austerities in order to extirpate the worlds, and you shall kill him.³

Viṣṇu explained that there would be a king called Bṛhadaçva who would have a son

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- 1) Sa tu devānsagandharvāñjitvā dhundhuramarṣaṇaḥ/
Babādha sarvāṇasakṛddevānviṣṇuṃ ca vai bhr̥ṣam// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 195.6.
 - 2) Çete lokavināçāya tapobalasamāçritah/
Uttānkasyāçramābhyāçe niḥçvasanpāvakārciṣaḥ// *ibid.*, 195.9.
 - 3) Pratibhāsyati yogaçca yena yukto divaukasām/
Trayāṇāmapi lokānām mahatkāryam kariṣyasi// *ibid.*, 192.25-26..
Utsādanārtham lokānām dhundhurnāma mahāsurah/
Tapasyati tapo ghoram çṛṇu yastam haniṣyati// *ibid.*, 192.25-26.

called Kuvalāṣva; and at the command of Uttāṅka this prince would slay the demon by having recourse to Viṣṇu's *yoga* power (*yogabalamāsthāya māmakam*).¹

And so, in due time, watched by all the assembled gods, King Kuvalāṣva rode out with his soldiers, his twenty-one thousand sons, and the great Uttāṅka to where Dhundhu lay performing his gruesome austerities to destroy the gods and the triple-world. And as the king rode out, 'then the blessed Lord Viṣṇu entered him with his fiery energy, upon the command of Uttāṅka, out of his desire for the welfare of the worlds.'² Full of the fiery energy of Nārāyaṇa, Kuvalāṣva had that sea of sand dug into for seven days until they found the terrible body (*ghoraṃ vapus*) of the sleeping Dhundhu that blazed with a fiery energy like that of the sun (*dīpyamānaṃ yathā sūryastejasā*).

King Kuvalāṣva and all his sons attacked the sleeping *asura* but the mighty demon rose angrily and devoured all their weapons, and vomiting fire like the fire of universal dissolution (*vamanpāvakaṃ ... saṃvartakasamaṃ*) he burnt with his fiery energy the sons of the king. However, much water then flowed from the body of King Kuvalāṣva which drank up (*āpiyata*) the fiery energy of the demon. Then the king burned down (*dadāha*) the cruel and mighty (*krūrāparākramam*) *daitya* with his Brahmā weapon.³

In these myths Viṣṇu predetermines that the destruction of a demonic threat must take place for the welfare of the triple-world, and then personally acts to bring this about through a mixture of cunning, deception and outright force. Viṣṇu directs the course of events in the triple-world towards a desired end - the preservation of order and *dharma* - but his methods are those of manipulation rather than predetermining each event through his supernatural powers. In other myths, too, Viṣṇu acts in a similar fashion to protect the position of Indra and the gods

1) *Ibid.*, 192.9-28.

2) *Tamāviṣattato viṣṇurbhagavānstejasā prabhuḥ/
Uttāṅkasya niyogena lokānāṃ hitakāmyayā*// *ibid.*, 195.12.

3) See *ibid.*, 195.1-28.

against a demonic threat.¹ For, as he explains to the gods, when they approach him through fear of Vṛtra: 'Of necessity, I must do what is for your highest welfare.'² Viṣṇu, like Brahmā before him, ultimately acts as the gods' keeper. However, in all this Viṣṇu is portrayed in mythological form as an anthropomorphic deity of admittedly superior might, rather than in more philosophical guise as the soul or ground of the universe which is the ultimate cause of all events.

Indeed, the text itself accounts for this in terms of the theory of the four forms, *caturmūrtidhara*. As Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu incarnate) explains it to Arjuna:

Ever engaged in the profit and protection of the worlds I have four forms. Dividing myself here, I maintain the welfare of the worlds. One of my forms, remaining on earth, performs ascetic austerities (*tapas*). Another observes the world (as it is) engaged in good and evil. Another (form) dwells in the world of men performing acts. But (my) other fourth form sleeps a sleep of a thousand years.³

All this is even truer of the most important means by which Viṣṇu intervenes in the processes of the triple-world - the *avatāra* form.⁴ There is no detailed or systematic account of the *avatāras* in the *Mahābhārata*, and in any case the theory was not to achieve full development until the post-Epic period.⁵ However, various *avatāras* are mentioned in passing in the course of the *Mahābhārata*. A brief account of the *avatāras*, for instance, is given in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* when the gods, appealing to Viṣṇu for rescue from the Kāleya demons, praise him for past feats: his rescue of the Earth from the ocean by assuming the guise of a boar; his destruction

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- 1) See the myth of the churning of the ocean, *Ādiparvan*, 15.10-17.30. For a recent analysis, see J.B. Long, 'Life Out of Death: A Structural Analysis of the Myth of the "Churning of the Ocean of Milk," ' in B.L. Smith (ed.), *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, pp.171-207. Also see the myth of the slaying of Vṛtra, *Udyogaparvan*, 9.40-10.43, 13.10-13.
 - 2) *Avaçyaṃ karaṇīyaṃ me bhavatāṃ hitamuttamam/ Udyogaparvan*, 10.10.
 - 3) *Caturmūrtirahaṃ çaçvallokatrāṇārthamudyataḥ/ Ātmānaṃ pravibhajyeha lokānāṃ hitamādadhe// Ekā mūrtistapaççaryāṃ kurute me bhuvi sthitā/ Aparā paçyati jagatkurvāṇaṃ sādhasādhunī// Aparā kurute karma mānuṣaṃ lokamāçritā/ Çete caturthī tvaparā nidrāṃ varṣasahasrikāṃ// Droṇaparvan*, 28.23-25.
 - 4) For the purpose of the *avatāra*, see *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 187.26-28, *Droṇaparvan*, 156.28-29, and p.121 above.
 - 5) See Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, pp.209-10, and R.M. Huntington, 'Avatāras and Yugas: An Essay in Purāṇic Cosmology', *Purāṇa*, vol. vi (1964), pp.7-39.

of the powerful *daitya* Hiranyakaçipu by assuming the form of a man-lion; and his ejection of the great *asura* Bali from the triple-world by assuming the form of a dwarf.¹

However, the only *avatāras* that are dealt with in more than passing fashion are Viṣṇu's incarnations as Rāma, the Boar and Kṛṣṇa. In the first, as we have seen, Viṣṇu appears as a mighty mortal hero who is moved this way and that by the hand of Brahmā. It is Brahmā who acts as the agent of destiny, not Viṣṇu. In the second, Viṣṇu assumes the guise of a boar, but this is no ordinary earthly boar for it seems to retain all the might and splendour of the supernatural Viṣṇu himself. Drawing upon this supernatural might, the Boar wreaks slaughter amongst the terrible demons who had vanquished the gods, and caused the Earth to sink under the burden of their numbers.² In this instance Viṣṇu rescues the Earth and restores *dharma* not so much by manipulating the flow of events, as by directly bending them with the force of his supernatural might.

The most important and complicated *avatāra* form in the *Mahābhārata* is of course that of Kṛṣṇa, and this we must now consider; for from the point of view of fate and free-will there are obvious difficulties in having God incarnate playing an active part in an heroic drama, let alone careering around on the battle-field.

In the mythology in which Brahmā is the supreme God, we have already seen how the central drama of the *Mahābhārata* and Viṣṇu's incarnation of Kṛṣṇa is set within the cosmic framework of the eternal conflict between gods and demons. In the Vaiṣṇavite mythology a similar cosmic setting is to be found, but with Viṣṇu the indisputable supreme God. Thus in the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, Bhīṣma related how once, in days of old, Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva appeared before Brahmā and the assembled gods. Thereupon Brahmā eulogised Vāsudeva as the lord, the origin and the protector of the universe, who was both the manifest and the unmanifest. It was through his grace (*tvatprasādam*) that Brahmā had created everything on earth, and indeed Brahmā

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 100.19-22. Also Ādiparvan, 19.12, and Āraṇyakaparvan, 299.13.

2) Çāntiparvan, 202.1-32.

himself had been created by Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva.¹ To this praise Viṣṇu replied that he knew what Brahmā desired through his *yoga* powers, and then he disappeared. The gods, seers and *gandharvas*, filled with wonder, asked to hear about who this great one was that Brahmā had so fulsomely praised. Brahmā explained that he had asked the Lord of the Universe (*jagatpatiḥ*) to take birth in the world of men to slaughter the *asuras* who had been born there. And so, together the two seers Nara and Nārāyaṇa would be born amongst men; but the deluded would not recognise them as such (*mūḍhāstvetau na jānanti*). Perhaps to save the celestials from being amongst the deluded, Brahmā warned that the gods and *asuras* should never look down upon (*avaḥjñeyo*) Vāsudeva because he had taken form as a man. Anyone who should disregard Vāsudeva for having the form of a man, was afflicted by the quality of darkness (*tāmasaṃ*). Gods and men should offer obeissence to Vāsudeva. Presumably, though, mortals were not to be openly favoured with this inside information.²

However, besides the supremacy of Viṣṇu, a significant new emphasis appears in the Vaiṣṇavite settings for the *Mahābhārata*. For instance, in the *Sabhāparvan* it is described how the peripatetic seer Nārada surveyed the multitudes of brahmins and *kṣatriyas* assembled for Yudhiṣṭhira's grand Royal Consecration:

Then, O lord of men, the hermit Nārada fell to thinking as he beheld (this) assembly of all the *kṣatriyas*. And he recalled, O Bull of the Bhāratas, the ancient tale which occurred in the abode of Brahmā at the time of the descent of the (divine) portions. O Joy of the Kurus, knowing (that this assembly was) an assembly of the gods, Nārada recalled in his mind the lotus-eyed Hari. The wise Lord Nārāyaṇa, destroyer of the enemies of the gods (and) conqueror of enemy cities, had been born in bodily form in the *kṣatriya* class to keep his promise. This creator of beings himself had formerly declared to the gods: 'You will attain your worlds again (after) having slain one another.' Having commanded all the gods so, the benevolent Nārāyaṇa, the blessed lord of the world, was born (on earth) in the house of the Yadus. ... (Thus) this enemy-crushing Hari, the strength of whose arms Indra and the gods all revered, had taken on human condition. Aho! alas! this Self-Existent Great Being himself will again carry off the *kṣatriya* class which is so full of might.³

1) Bhīṣmaparvan, 61.38-67.

2) *Ibid.*, 62.1-23.

3) *Atha cintāṃ samāpede sa munirmanujādhipa/
Nāradaśtaṃ tadā paçyansarvakṣatrasamāgamam//
Sasmāra ca purāvr̥ttāṃ kathāṃ tām bharatarṣabha/
Añçāvatarāṇe yāsau brahmaṇo bhavane abhavat//
Devānāṃ saṃgamam taṃ tu vijñāya kurunandana/*

This myth seemingly recalls the above version in which Brahmā commands the gods to be born on earth with portions of themselves; but Viṣṇu is now undeniably the supreme God, and principal mover in events. But more importantly, Viṣṇu's purpose is not so much to relieve the earth of the burden of demonic *kṣatriyas*, but to relieve it of all *kṣatriyas*.

Elsewhere, too, there are suggestions of this changed purpose. Thus when Draupadī emerged from the sacrificial fire, born from a portion of the Goddess ̐rī, a disembodied voice spoke (vāguvācāṣarīrīṇī): 'Choicest of all women, the Dark Woman shall lead the *kṣatriya* class to destruction. In time this fair-waisted woman shall effect the design of the gods. Because of her, great danger shall arise for the *kṣatriyas*.' At this all the assembled Pañcāla warriors roared like lions, though as they were *kṣatriyas* themselves it is not easy to see why. As well, after Arjuna had been defeated in personal combat by ̐iva in the guise of a mountain man and had been rewarded with the mighty Pāṇupata weapon, he is approached by the World Guardians who bestow yet more divine weapons. And Yama explains to Arjuna the task he and Kṛṣṇa will achieve for the gods:

You are the mighty ancient ̐ṣi Nara, of departed soul. O Son, upon Brahmā's command, you - of great might and prowess - have become mortal, born through Indra. The *kṣatriya* class - like fire to the touch - which is protected by Bhāradvāja (= Droṇa), the powerful *dānavas* who have been born men, and also the *Nivātakavacas* are to be (all) subdued (by you), O son of the Kurus. Karna, who is a portion of my father, the god who heats all the world, that mighty Karna will be slain by you, O Dhanamjaya. And the portions of gods, *gandharvas* and *rākṣasas* that have come to earth, (when) slain in battle by you, O enemy-

Nāradaḥ puṇḍarikākṣaṃ sasmāra manasā harim//
Sākṣātsa vibudhārighnaḥ kṣatre nārāyaṇo vibhuḥ/
Pratiṣṭhāṃ pālayandhīmāñjātaḥ parapuraṃjayah//
Saṃdideṣa purā yo asau vibudhānbhūtakṛtsvayam/
Anyonyamabhinighnantaḥ punarlokānavāpsyatha//
Iti nārāyaṇaḥ ṣaṃburbhagavāñjagataḥ prabhuḥ/
Ādīṣya vibudhānsarvāñjāyata yadukṣaye// Sabhāparvan, 33.11-16.
Yasya bāhubalaṃ sendrāḥ surāḥ sarva upāsate/
So ayaṃ mānuṣavannāma harirāste arimardanaḥ//
Aho bata mahadbhūtaṃ svayambhūryadidaṃ svayam/
Ādāsyati punaḥ kṣatramevaṃ balasamanvitam// *ibid.*, 33.18-19.

- 1) Sarvayoṣidvarā kṛṣṇā kṣayaṃ kṣatraṃ ninīṣati//
Surakāryamiyaṃ kāle kariṣyati sumadhyamā/
Asyā hetoḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ mahadutpatsyate bhayam// Ādīparvan, 155.44-45.

crusher, will each attain the end gained by the fruit of their own acts, O Kaunteya. ... Along with Viṣṇu, you will make the Earth light again.'

In the *Strīparvan*, after the end of the great battle, the sage Vyāsa explains to his grief-stricken son, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, 'the design of the deities' (*devatānām hi yatkāryam*). Vyāsa recounts that once he had seen the Goddess Earth in her embodied form come to the court of Indra where all the inhabitants of Heaven were assembled; and there she reminded them of the promise they had made to her in Brahmā's abode. Then Viṣṇu assured her that the eldest of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's one hundred sons, Duryodhana, would accomplish her purpose:

For his sake, the kings of the earth will assemble together on Kurukṣetra. Fighting with hard weapons they will cause each other to be killed. Thus, O Goddess, your burden will be removed in battle. Go quickly to your own station to bear the worlds, O beautiful woman.²²

Therefore, concluded Vyāsa:

O King, this son of yours was born a portion of Kali in the womb of Gāndhārī for the cause of a destruction of the worlds. He was intolerant, unsteady, wrathful and difficult to deal with. Arising from the influence of fate, his brothers were the same.²³

In all this, Vyāsa explained, Duryodhana was the mere instrument of fate and Time, which in this context would seem to be identical with the will of the gods: 'Before your very eyes, O king, the origin of this disagreeable (conflict) was created as a

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- 1) Pūrvarṣiramitātmā tvaṃ naro nāma mahābalaḥ/
Niyogādbrahmaṇastāta martyatām samupāgataḥ/
Tvaṃ vāsavasamudbhūto mahāvīryaparākramaḥ//
Kṣatram cāgnisamasparṇam bhāradvājena rakṣitam/
Dānavāṅca mahāvīryā ye manuṣyatvamāgatāḥ/
Nivātakavacāṅcaiva saṃsādhyāḥ kurunandana//
Piturmamāṅcho devasya sarvalokapratāpinaḥ/
Karnaḥ sa sumahāvīryastvayā vadhyo dhanamjaya//
Aṅgāṅca kṣītisaṃprāptā devagandharvarakṣasām/
Tvayā nipātītā yuddhe svakarmaphalanirjitām/
Gatim prāpsyanti kaunteya yathāsvamarikarṇaḥ//
Laghvī vasumatī cāpi kartavyā viṣṇunā saha// Āraṇyakaparvan, 42.18-22.
 - 2) Tasyārthe prthivīpālāḥ kurukṣetre samāgatāḥ/
Anyonyam ghātayiṣyanti dr̥ḍhaiḥ cāstraiḥ prahāriṇaḥ//
Tataste bhavitā devi bhārasya yudhi nāṇanam/
Gaccha cīghram svakam sthānam lokāndhārāya cōbhane// Strīparvan, 8.25-26.
 - 3) Sa eṣa te suto rājānillokaśamhārakāraṇāt/
Kalerāṅgaḥ samutpanno gāndhāryā jathare nṛpa//
Amarṣī capalaṅcāpi krodhano duṣprasādhanah/
Daivayogātsamutpannā bhrātaraṅcāsyā tādr̥ḣāḥ// *ibid.*, 8.27-28.

consequence of Time (which) made your son the cause. The destruction of the Kurus, O king, inevitably had to be. ... The course produced by fate cannot be (averted) by any being."

Viṣṇu, then, descends to earth as Kṛṣṇa either as an agent of Brahmā to relieve the earth of its burden of demonic *kṣatriyas*, or in his own right to relieve the earth of its burden of all *kṣatriyas*. From our point of view the question that matters is whether Kṛṣṇa achieves his purpose by directly controlling events and actors through the exercise of his supernatural powers, or by influencing events and actors through manipulation and scheming. If the former, then the course of events is predetermined by God in the strict sense of the word, and men are reduced to controlled puppets. If the latter, then the course of events remains beyond God's overpowering control, and men retain some degree of freedom.

Obviously Kṛṣṇa's exact status as an *avatāra* is relevant to this problem. However, the *Mahābhārata* is not perfectly consistent on this. In some parts, the assumption seems to be that Kṛṣṇa is a God whose form is mortal (Kṛṣṇa is even slain at the end²) but whose powers are divine, though they are to be restrained for the duration of his *avatāra*. At times the bonds of restraint become very stretched and occasionally broken. For instance, when Kṛṣṇa and his people arrive in the forest to visit the just exiled Pāṇḍavas, Kṛṣṇa was enraged at the treatment they had received, and pronounced death upon Duryodhana and his cohorts. Arjuna then appeased Kṛṣṇa by reciting the great feats of his previous lives, for in his anger he seemed desirous of burning down creatures (*didhakṣantamiva prajāḥ*).³ And during his mission of peace to the Kaurava court before the battle, Kṛṣṇa learns of Duryodhana's plot

1) Pratyakṣaṃ tava rājendra vairasyāśya samudbhavaḥ/
Putraṃ te kāraṇaṃ kṛtvā kālayogena kāritaḥ// (15)

Avaṣyaṃ bhavitavye ca kurūṇāṃ vaiṣase nṛpa/ (16)

Na ca daivakṛto mārگاḥ cakyo bhūtena kenacit/ (18) *ibid.*, 8.15-16 & 18.

As well, after the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis, Vyāsa tells Arjuna that Kṛṣṇa, having removed the burden of the earth (*kṛtvā bhārāvatarāṇaṃ prthivyāḥ*) had returned to his own highest abode. And by the Pāṇḍavas, too, the great task of the gods (*mahatkarma devānāṃ*) had been accomplished. See Mausalaparvan, 9.29-33.

2) Mausalaparvan, 5.18-22.

3) Āraṇyakaparvan, 13.7-36.

to take him captive. To demonstrate the futility of Duryodhana's evil intention, a laughing Kṛṣṇa reveals to the court his real, divine, and wondrous form. From the various parts of his body appeared all the gods, Brahmā and Rudra, as well as the Pāṇḍava brothers and the Andhakas and Vṛṣṇis with their terrible weapons. There also appeared many weapons in Kṛṣṇa's multiple arms, and dreadful flames came from his eyes, nose and ears.¹ However, though the assembled court closed their eyes in awe, Kṛṣṇa ultimately still only used his powers of persuasion upon them in his efforts to gain peace.

As well, in the course of the battle, an enraged Kṛṣṇa is only barely restrained by Arjuna from intervening to slaughter Bhīṣma, who had been decimating the Pāṇḍava forces, while Arjuna shirked battle with his grandfather.² Even then, Kṛṣṇa still assured a despondent Yudhiṣṭhira that through their friendship he would if necessary fight Bhīṣma himself, although this was a task Arjuna should fulfill.³ Elsewhere, too, Kṛṣṇa indicates his preparedness to slay Karna and Duryodhana for Arjuna's sake, after Arjuna had rashly jeopardised his life - and the divine plan - by swearing to slay King Jayadratha before the next day was done, or enter a burning fire.⁴ It was the action of King Jayadratha that had allowed the destruction of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. However, Arjuna achieved the feat, although only with Kṛṣṇa's constant guidance. In this example, Yudhiṣṭhira also looked upon Kṛṣṇa as God all-mighty who was merely restraining himself. When Yudhiṣṭhira feared that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa were in trouble in their efforts to slay King Jayadratha, he despatched Sātyaki to their aid, though at great danger to himself, for Droṇa was intent on his capture. Yudhiṣṭhira explained that it was Arjuna he feared for. Kṛṣṇa, the 'Protector' and 'Lord of the Universe', could conquer in battle the triple-world united against him.⁵ In the Karna-parvan, as Arjuna and Karna finally pair off for conflict, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa what he would do if Karna should slay him. Kṛṣṇa assured

1) Udyogaparvan, 129.1-10.

3) Ibid., 103.26-30.

5) Ibid., 85.85-88.

2) Bhīṣmaparvan, 102.50-70.

4) Droṇaparvan, 56.22-29.

Arjuna that Karna would never slay him, but added if so he would slay both Karna and Çalya.¹

In two instances, at least, Kṛṣṇa does intervene with his divine powers to preserve the Pāṇḍava cause. Kṛṣṇa uses his divine powers to save Arjuna from a great snake-mouthed arrow (*sarpamukham*) which Karna had especially guarded for his destruction. After Karna released this arrow which he had aimed at Arjuna's neck, Kṛṣṇa pressed the chariot down with his foot so that it sunk into the ground sufficiently for the missile to strike Arjuna's crown and not decapitate him.² As well, after the end of the great battle, marked by the destruction of Duryodhana, the Pāṇḍavas return to their camp. Kṛṣṇa then instructs Arjuna to take up his great Gāṇḍiva bow and his inexhaustible quivers, and to alight before him. And once Kṛṣṇa alighted from the mighty chariot, it was consumed by fire. To the awed Pāṇḍavas, Kṛṣṇa explained that Arjuna's celestial chariot had already been burned down by the various divine weapons with which it had been struck. It was only because Kṛṣṇa had stood upon it in battle that it had not broken apart (*madadhiṣṭhitatvātsamare na viçīrṇah*).³

However, the more normal view in the *Mahābhārata* would seem to be that Kṛṣṇa is a God whose form and powers are mortal for the duration of his incarnation. Kṛṣṇa himself explains this to the seer Uttanika as he returns home after the long delayed death of Bhīṣma.⁴ Now Uttanika had apparently been so absorbed in his

1) Karna-parvan, 63.75-77.

2) The editor of the Critical Edition of the *Karna-parvan* writes that he only included these *çloka* reluctantly for their substance appears in all the different versions. He feels that they were introduced at a considerably later stage to glorify the divine powers of Kṛṣṇa at a time when the Kṛṣṇa cult influenced the redactors of the Epic. He notes that they are in the *anuṣṭubh* metre in the midst of a ballad in the *trīṣṭubh* metre. If they are omitted there is no break in the narration. And rationally there is no need for them for Çalya had already warned Karna that he had not aimed the arrow correctly. P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *The Karna-parvan*, p.695.

3) Çalya-parvan, 61.8-19.

4) These chapters, as the editor of the *parvan* rightly notes, have little literary merit: 'The whole episode that follows appears to be irrelevant and absurd.' (R.D. Karmarkar ed., *The Āçvamedhikaparvan*, p.468) Nevertheless, it does contain one of the few direct attempts in the Epic to deal with the problem of the nature of the Kṛṣṇa *avatāra*.

austerities that he was not aware of the terrible battle. Seeing Kṛṣṇa, Uttan̄ka asked if he had yet brought about a reconciliation between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. Kṛṣṇa explains that he had done his best to achieve peace, but all had been destroyed, and added: 'With intelligence or power, it is not possible to transgress what is ordained.'¹ Uttan̄ka suddenly burns with anger and threatens to curse Kṛṣṇa for he had not forcibly (*prasabham*) brought peace to the warring parties.

Kṛṣṇa then recounts his greatness as the supreme God; but also explains his limitations as God incarnate:

As the ages come and go, entering into various wombs, I have to dam the dike of *dharma* through my desire for the good of creatures. When, O son of Bhṛgu, I live in the order of the gods, then - have no doubt - I act in every way as a god. When, O son of Bhṛgu, I live in the order of the *gandharvas*, then, O Bhārgava, I perform actions in every way as a *gandharva*. And also when I live in the order of *nāgas*, then (I act) as a *nāga*; and (when I live) in the order of *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*, I act accordingly. Living now in the order of men, I implored them pitifully. (But) deluded, they heeded not my salutary words.²

Kṛṣṇa's explanation that as God incarnate in the world of men, he is limited to the means and methods available to men is substantially borne out in the *Mahābhārata*. Despite Kṛṣṇa's later image as the playful child, and the fun-loving and amorous youth,³ in the great Epic his means and methods are those typified in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*. In the *Mahābhārata* Kṛṣṇa freely mixes power with ruthless calculation, deceit, williness and cunning, to manoeuvre the course of events towards the end he desires.⁴

1) Na diṣṭamabhyatikrāntuṃ cakyaṃ buddhyā balena vā/ Āṇvamedhikaparvan, 52.16.

2) Dharmasya setuṃ badhnāmi calite calite yuge/
Tāsyā yonih praviṣyāhaṃ prajānāṃ hitakāmyayā//
Yadā tvahaṃ devayonau vartāmi bhṛgunandana/
Tadāhaṃ devavatsarvamācarāmi na saṃcayah//
Yadā gandharvayonau tu vartāmi bhṛgunandana/
Tadā gandharvavacceṣṭāḥ sarvācceṣṭāmi bhārgava//
Nāgayonau yadā caiva tadā vartāmi nāgavat/
Yakṣarākṣasayoniṣca yathāvadvicarāmyaham//
Mānuṣye vartamāne tu kṛpāṇaṃ yācitā mayā/
Na ca te jātasam̄mohā vaco gr̥hṇanti me hitam// *ibid.*, 53.15-19.

3) See D. Kinsley, *The Divine Player (A Study of Kṛṣṇa Līlā)* pp.56-121; and N. Hein, 'A Revolution in Kṛṣṇaism: The Cult of Gopāla', *History of Religions*, vol.25 (1986), pp.297-317.

4) According to R.C. Zaehner 'the God Kṛṣṇa represents the old order in which the

Many examples could be cited to illustrate Kṛṣṇa's method of operation, for he is invariably always near the centre of the unfolding drama; even his absences - e.g. from the gaming - are crucial. We shall, however, limit ourselves to three fairly representative instances.

The first example occurs after the successful completion of the Pāṇḍava's exile. Urged on by his brothers, and Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira asks for the return of his kingdom. However, fearing war with all its frightful consequences, Yudhiṣṭhira indicates that he will accept only five villages (one for himself and one for each brother) for his kingdom. Duryodhana, though, will not even yield as much land as could be covered by the point of a needle. Kṛṣṇa, God incarnate, had no doubts left: the Dhārtarāṣṭras were no longer to be trusted and deserved death. And the Pāṇḍava brothers were to be God's chosen instrument of destruction. Kṛṣṇa proposed a last personal peace mission, but he now only expected war.¹ To Yudhiṣṭhira, Kṛṣṇa explained:

As long as you treat them with leniency, O king, so long will they keep your kingdom, enemy-tamer. Not from sympathy, nor compassion, nor arguments of *dharma* and profit will the Dhārtarāṣṭras do your desire, enemy-tamer. ... They should be slain by anyone - how much more, then, by you, O Bhārata.²

The Pāṇḍava brothers, though, were by no means reliable instruments when faced with the full horrors of fratricidal conflict. While Arjuna provides the most notable

ksatriya dharma and all that it entails of trickery and violence has an honourable place, whereas the man Yudhiṣṭhira, the King of Dharma, starting from the premisses of the religion of his time, slowly comes to realize that it is fraught with injustice and plain stupid in that to seek vengeance is to bring vengeance on oneself.' (R.C. Zaehner, 'The Greatness of Man and the Wretchedness of God' in Concordant Discordant, p.177.) For Zaehner, the contrast between the methods and ideals of Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira is the main theme of the *Mahābhārata* (*ibid.*, p.176). Although Zaehner somewhat overdraws the two characters, and though we might wonder if a text with so many themes could ever have a main theme, the contrast remains highly enlightening.

1) Udyogaparvan, 71.33-34.

2) Yāvaccā mardavenaitānrājannupacariṣyasi/
Tāvadete hariṣyanti tava rājyamariṣdama// (8)
Nānukroṣānna kārpaṇyānna ca dharmārthakāraṇāt/
Alaṃ kartuṃ dhārtarāṣṭrāstava kāmamariṣdama// (9)
Vadhyāste sarvalokasya kiṃ punastava bhārata// (13) *ibid.*, 71.8-9 & 13.

loss of nerve in the *Mahābhārata*, even Bhīmasena was not immune;¹ but the most consistent and important doubter was Yudhiṣṭhira himself. And being the eldest Pāṇḍava, all his brothers were duty bound to follow his lead. However, at all times, Kṛṣṇa was there to cajole and goad the Pāṇḍavas to do his will.

At this critical point, when Yudhiṣṭhira is all but inescapably faced with the war he had so strenuously laboured to avoid, he still wavers torn by the conflicting demands of *dharma*. As the King of Dharma, he above all others should accept the duty prescribed for his class; but Yudhiṣṭhira is attracted by the call of a higher eternal *dharma* which is developing in his conscience, the precepts of which cannot be reconciled with the savage code of the *kṣatriya*. Yudhiṣṭhira, in his frustration, turns on the *varṇa* based system of *dharma* with its justification for and encouragement of war. Though Yudhiṣṭhira accepts that there is no way whatever that they could forego their ancestral fortune,² all his arguments pointed in the other direction:

Kṛṣṇa, even enemies who are ignoble and unrelated should not be slain, let alone those of this sort. For they are kinsmen for the most part, and comrades and *gurus* of ours; and to slay them would be the extremity of evil. (But) what is attractive in war? This *kṣatriya dharma* is evil, and we belong to the *kṣatriya* order. It is our *svadharma* (though) it is *adharma*; any other mode of life is forbidden (to us). The *çūdra* practices obedience, the *vaiçya* lives by trade, we live by killing, (and) the brahmin chooses the begging bowl. O Dāçārha, *kṣatriya* kills *kṣatriya*, fish lives on fish, dog kills dog - behold the *dharma* as it has come down. In war, Kṛṣṇa, there is always strife; in battle lives are lost. ... War is wrong in every way. He who kills, is he not killed (in turn)? And for the one who is killed, victory and defeat are the same, O Hṛṣīkeṣa! I think defeat is not distinguishable from death; (and), Kṛṣṇa, even the victor is assuredly diminished. ... The consequence here is evil; and moreover survivors do remain. The survivors, obtaining strength (anew), leave no survivors (as) they strive for total extermination through desire to end the feud. Victory creates (further) hostility (for) the defeated remain uneasy; (but) having abandoned victory and defeat, a tranquil man sleeps easily. ... For manly action is a powerful anxiety, an affliction in the heart; (and) tranquillity is (to be found) through its renunciation.³

1) See *ibid.*, 72.1 - 74.18.

2) *Te vyaṃ na çriyaṃ hātumalaṃ nyāyena kenacit/ ibid.*, 70.41.

3) *Ye punaḥ syurasambaddhā anāryāḥ kṛṣṇa çatravaḥ/
Teṣāmapyavadhaḥ kāryaḥ kiṃ punarye syuridrçāḥ//
Jñātayaçca hi bhūyiṣṭhāḥ sahāyā guravaçca naḥ/
Teṣāṃ vadho atipāpiyānkiṃ nu yuddhe asti çobhanam//
Pāpaḥ kṣatriyadharmo ayaṃ vyaṃ ca kṣatrabāndhavāḥ/
Sa naḥ svadharmo adharmo vā vṛttiranyā vigarhitā//*

Despite the force of his arguments, Yudhiṣṭhira was still prepared to contemplate war, although only with the greatest reluctance. It was a negotiated peace that Yudhiṣṭhira set his heart upon: 'Therefore, we do not want to renounce (our kingdom), and nor do we wish to destroy our family. ... If the conciliatory words of those who strive by all means, through desire for peace, are rebuffed (then) an unheroic war will be brought about.'

Kṛṣṇa, though, has no time at all for this nonsense about renunciation, and treats Yudhiṣṭhira to a scathing exhortation on action and *kṣatriya dharma*:

A vow of eternal chastity is not the business of a *kṣatriya*, O lord of people! All those who abide by the life stages have declared what a *kṣatriya* should beg for (his) alms: victory or death in battle (as) the Placer has eternally ordained. This is the *svadharma* of the *kṣatriya*; weakness is not extolled. For, by adopting weakness, (proper) conduct is impossible. Be brave, strong-armed (king)! Slay your enemies, enemy-tamer!²

Çūdraḥ karoti çuçrūṣāṃ vaiçyā vipañijīvinah/
Vayaṃ vadhena jīvāmaḥ kapālaṃ brāhmaṇairvṛtam//
Kṣatriyaḥ kṣatriyaṃ hanti matsyo matsyena jīvati/
Çvā çvānaṃ hanti dāçārha paçya dharmo yathāgataḥ//
Yuddhe kṛṣṇa kalirṇityaṃ prāṇāḥ sīdanti saṃyuge/ *ibid.*, 70.44-49.
Sarvathā vṛjīnaṃ yuddhaṃ ko ghnanna pratihanyate/
Hatasya ca hrṣīkeça samau jayaparājayau//
Parājayaçca maraṇānmanyē naiva viçīṣyate/
Yasya syādvijayaḥ kṛṣṇa tasyāpyapacayo dhruvam// *ibid.*, 70.53-54.
Anubandhaçca pāpo atra çeçaçcāpyavaçiṣyate//
Çeço hi balamāsādyā na çeşamavaçeṣayet/
Sarvocchede ca yatate vairasyāntavidhitisayā//
Jayo vairāṃ prasṛjati duḥkhamāste parājitaḥ/
Sukhaṃ praçāntaḥ svapitī hitvā jayaparājayau// *ibid.*, 70.57-59.
Pauruṣeyo hi balavānādhirhrdayabādhanaḥ/
Tasya tyāgena vā çāntirṇivṛttyā manaso api vā// *ibid.*, 70.65.

- 1) Na ca tyaktuṃ tadicchāmo na cecchāmaḥ kulakṣayam/ (68)
Sarvathā yatamānānāmāyuddhamabhikāṅkṣatām/
Sāntve pratihate yuddhaṃ prasiddhamaparākramam// (69) *ibid.*, 70.68 & 69.
- 2) Na ca tannaisthikaṃ karma kṣatriyasya viçāṃ pate/
Āhurāçramiṇaḥ sarve yadbhaikṣaṃ kṣatriyaçcaret//
Jayo vadho vā saṃgrāme dhātrā diṣṭaḥ sanātanaḥ/
Svadharmāḥ kṣatriyasyaīṣa kārpaṇyaṃ na praçasyate//
Na hi kārpaṇyamāsthāya çakyā vṛttiryudhiṣṭhira/
Vikramasva mahābāho jahī çatrūnarīṇdama// *ibid.*, 71.3-5.

After the failure of Kṛṣṇa's mission, Yudhiṣṭhira does obey his God.¹ But as Yudhiṣṭhira marches out with his great army, his doubts and misgivings are stronger than ever. As he contemplates the destruction of those who should not be killed, he sighs and says to his brothers:

This ultimate disaster, for the sake of which I dwelt in the forest and suffered hardship, approaches us despite our efforts. ... How can we do battle with those who are not to be slain? How can there be victory for us, having killed our *gurus* and elders?²

There is no sympathy for Yudhiṣṭhira. Arjuna replies that they could not retreat now without fighting; and Kṛṣṇa, smiling (*smayamāno*), says curtly: 'that is so' (*evametaditi bruvan*).³

When battle is joined, Kṛṣṇa acts in a non-combatant capacity as Arjuna's charioteer and adviser. Throughout Kṛṣṇa plays a crucial role as adviser guiding the Pāṇḍavas through the various crisis points in the struggle. However, Kṛṣṇa does not do this because he is the omnipotent and all-powerful God who ordains the course of events; indeed, at various points of the battle Kṛṣṇa is entirely ignorant as to what has happened and as to what will happen next. At one point in the battle with the Trigartas, for instance, their chariot disappears within a shower of arrows. Even Kṛṣṇa is rattled. Downcast (*khinnas*) and perspiring (*prasiṣṭide*) he asks Arjuna: 'Where are you, O Pārtha; I do not see you; do you live, enemy-slayer?'⁴ And when Arjuna sees dreadful omens of some calamity - in fact, the destruction of his son Abhimanyu - Kṛṣṇa, apparently unaware, reassures him that it can be nothing much.⁵ At another point in the battle, Kṛṣṇa sees Yudhiṣṭhira being pursued by the Dhārtarāṣṭras, and from their triumphant cries he fears the worst, namely that Yudhiṣṭhira has been slain. Though sorely wounded, nonetheless Yudhiṣṭhira was still

1) At various points Yudhiṣṭhira recognises Kṛṣṇa as all-mighty God. cf. Droṇa-parvan, 59.8-10, 85.85, 124.5-18; Ālyaparvan, 62.26; Āntiparvan, 46.27 & 30.

2) Yadarthaṃ vanavāsaṣṭha prāptaṃ duḥkhaṃ ca yanmayā/
So ayamaśmānupaityeva paro anarthaḥ prayatnataḥ//
Kathaṃ hyavadhyaḥ saṃgrāmaḥ kāryaḥ saha bhaviṣyati/
Kathaṃ hatvā gurūnvrddhānviṣayo no bhaviṣyati// Udyogaparvan, 151.20 & 22.

3) *Ibid.*, 151.23-26.

4) Kvāsi pārtha na paṇye tvāṃ kaccijjīvasi çatruhan// Droṇaparvan, 18.21.

5) *Ibid.*, 50.4-7.

alive.' And it is only when Kṛṣṇa is at the Kaurava court attempting to pacify the anger of Gāndhārī and king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, that he suddenly became aware of Aṣvatthāman's intended purpose to attack the Pāṇḍava's night camp, whereupon he hurried off.²

Kṛṣṇa's role is crucial, then, not because he is omnipotent and all-powerful, but because he combines cunning and ruthlessness with a preparedness to bend or set aside the dharmic rules of warfare to achieve his end. Nowhere is this more evident than in the destruction of Droṇa.

After the elimination of Bhīṣma, Droṇa becomes general of the Kaurava army and plays havoc with the Pāṇḍava forces like the god of death himself (*kṛtāntavat*). Now, seeing the Pāṇḍavas oppressed by the arrows of Droṇa and greatly afraid, Kṛṣṇa concluded that if the battle was to be won - and Kṛṣṇa's purpose achieved - then the rules of warfare would have to be broken. Therefore, advising the Pāṇḍavas that Droṇa could never be conquered in battle, Kṛṣṇa counselled:

Sons of Pāṇḍu, cast aside *dharma* (and) adopt a trick for (attaining) victory, so that he of the golden chariot will not slay us all in battle. I think he will cease to fight upon the death of (his son) Aṣvatthāman. (Therefore) let some man tell him that he (Aṣvatthāman) has been slain in battle.³

Now Yudhiṣṭhira only approved of this scheme with difficulty (*kṛcchreṇa*), and Arjuna not at all for Droṇa was his beloved teacher. However, Bhīmasena slew with his mighty club a huge elephant called Aṣvatthāman and, approaching Droṇa in battle, loudly proclaimed with some bashfulness (*savriḍam*) that Aṣvatthāman had been slain.

1) Kārṇaparvan, 43.18-20.

2) Čalyaparvan, 62.66 Indeed, in the Droṇaparvan there seems to be a later attempt to correct Kṛṣṇa's apparent ignorance of events. In this instance, Droṇa gives a very special suit of invulnerable armour to Duryodhana before he does battle with Arjuna. Now Arjuna, a former pupil of Droṇa, knows full well of the armour; but Kṛṣṇa is astonished that Arjuna's arrows have no effect and questions whether Arjuna is handling the great Gāṇḍīva bow properly. However, presumably a later redactor feels that God incarnate should also know. For Arjuna quickly tells Kṛṣṇa not to confuse him, for in the triple-world Kṛṣṇa knew the past, present, and future. Droṇaparvan, 78.3-15.

3) Āsthīyatām jaye yogo dharmamutsrjya pāṇḍava/
Yathā vaḥ saṃyuge sarvāṇṇa hanyādrukmaṇāhanāḥ//
Aṣvatthāmani hate naiṣa yudhyediti matirmama/
Taṃ hataṃ saṃyuge kaṇḍasmai ṇaṇṣatu mānavāḥ// Droṇaparvan, 164.68-69.

Now Droṇa quite rightly suspected the veracity of Bhīma; but believing that Yudhiṣṭhira would never tell a lie even for the sovereignty of the triple-world, Droṇa asked the King of Dharma if his son had been slain. Though Yudhiṣṭhira had never told a lie before, Kṛṣṇa, intent on his purpose whatever the price, goaded him on: 'If Droṇa, full of rage, should fight for half a day, I say truly your army will meet destruction. Your Lordship must save us from Droṇa! Untruth is preferable to truth! He who speaks a falsehood for the sake of life is not touched by untruth!'¹ Now, urged on by the words of Kṛṣṇa (*kṛṣṇavākya-coditaḥ*) and attached to victory (*jaye sakto*), though fearful of an untruth, Yudhiṣṭhira said aloud that Aṣvatthāman was dead, adding indistinctly (*avyaktaṃ*) the word elephant.² Droṇa, of course was filled with grief, and laying aside his weapons he was slain by Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna.

Through pressuring Yudhiṣṭhira to participate in his cunning trick, the God incarnate had saved the Pāṇḍava cause and his own divine plan. The consequences of his falsity, though, rebounded not on God but on man, for whereas previously Yudhiṣṭhira's chariot, because of his virtue, had travelled just above the surface of the earth, it now sank to the ground.³

Our final example of Kṛṣṇa's methods occurs after the end of the great battle when Duryodhana alone remained of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's one hundred sons, and only three others survive from his great army. After the final battle, Duryodhana flees the field of battle and seeks refuge below the waters of a lake. When his whereabouts are discovered by the Pāṇḍavas, they challenge him to arise and fight to the death as a *kṣatriya* should. Stung by taunts of cowardice, Duryodhana does so, proclaiming his fear of no one and asking only that he be allowed to fight the

1) Yadyardhadivasam droṇo yudhyate manyumāsthitaḥ/
 Satyaṃ bravīmi te senā vināṣaṃ samupaiṣyati// *ibid.*, 164.98-99.
 Sa bhavānstrātu no droṇātsatyājjyāyo anṛtaṃ bhavet/
 Anṛtaṃ jīvitasyārthe vadanna spr̥ṣyate anṛtaḥ// *ibid.*, 164.98-99.

2) *Ibid.*, 164.105-6.

3) *Ibid.*, 164.107. It is worth noting that of the foremost Kaurava warriors, Ṣalya alone seems to be slain (by Yudhiṣṭhira) in fair combat. Even the text specifically notes that Ṣalya was slain in a righteous battle (*dharmye ... yuddhe nihato*). Ṣalyaparvan, 16.55.

Pāṇḍava forces one by one. In this way he would fulfill his debt to those *kṣatriyas* who had fought and died for his cause.¹

Yudhiṣṭhira is impressed by Duryodhana's forthright adherence to *kṣatriya dharma*, and offers extremely generous terms of combat to one who had throughout done everything possible to cheat and humiliate him. Yudhiṣṭhira bade his defeated enemy pick any Pāṇḍava brother he wished, and with the weapon of his own choosing, kill or be killed in personal combat. As if this were not enough, Yudhiṣṭhira promised that if Duryodhana were victorious he would be king.²

At a stroke, however, Yudhiṣṭhira's generosity had thrown into jeopardy the entire Pāṇḍava cause and more importantly the whole divine plan over which Kṛṣṇa had manipulated and manoeuvred for so long. Kṛṣṇa was enraged (*saṃkruddho*) and berated Yudhiṣṭhira for his rash generosity:

O king, what reckless (words) have you uttered of this sort! ... Out of compassion, best of kings, you have acted rashly. ... Now, as before, you have again entered upon a game of chance like the painful (game) between you and Çakuni, O lord of men. Bhīma is strong and very powerful (but) king Suyodhana is skilful. When strength and skill clash together, O king, skill is superior. You have provided, O king, such an enemy with an easy path; (but) you have placed yourself in a difficult (position) and we have been reduced to great danger!³

A tremendous battle between Bhīma and Duryodhana then ensued with both showing their strength and skill to great effect; but as the conflict proceeded it merely confirmed Kṛṣṇa's worst fears. To Arjuna he confided that if Bhīma were to fight

1) *Ibid.*, 30.1-67, 31.1-21.

2) *Ibid.*, 31.24-53.

3) Kimidaṃ sāhasaṃ rājanstvayā vyāhṛtamidr̥cam/ (3)
Sāhasaṃ kṛtavāṅstvam tu hyanukroçānnṛpottama// (5)
Tadidaṃ dyūtamārabdhaṃ punareva yathā purā/
Viśamaṃ çakuneçcaiva tava caiva viçāṃ pate// (7)
Balī bhīmaḥ samarthaçca kṛtī rājā suyodhanaḥ/
Balavānvā kṛtī vetī kṛtī rājanviçīṣyate//
So ayaṃ rājanstvayā çatruḥ same pathi niveçitaḥ/
Nyastaçcātmā suviṣame kṛcchramāpādītā vayam/ *ibid.*, 32.3,5,7-9.

only by the rules of *dharma*, he would never gain victory (*dharmeṇa yudhyamāno na jeṣyati*). Citing the various acts of deceit (*māyā*) employed by the gods to defeat the demons, Kṛṣṇa reminded Arjuna of Bhīma's vow at the time of the gambling to break Duryodhana's thighs in battle, and concluded 'Let him cut down this deceitful king with deceit alone.' Having heard the views of God incarnate, Arjuna struck his thigh with his left hand before Bhīma's eyes. And as Duryodhana executed a move which involved leaping in the air, Bhīma smashed his thighs with a foul blow which was contrary to even the *kṣatriya* rules of *dharma*.²

With this ruthless act of *adharma*, Kṛṣṇa again salvaged the Pāṇḍava cause and his own plan from events that had temporarily run beyond his control. Interestingly, Kṛṣṇa's justification is morally of the thinnest kind. When the enraged Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's elder brother, rushed at Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa quickly conjured up various arguments to defend his agent. Kṛṣṇa firstly argued that the Pāṇḍavas were their natural allies, and therefore a threat to the Pāṇḍavas was a threat to them as well, which required a remedy - presumably any remedy. Secondly, Kṛṣṇa recalled to mind Bhīma's oath and Maitreya's curse upon Duryodhana that Bhīma would break his thighs. However, the implication would seem to be that an oath must be fulfilled regardless of considerations of *dharma*. Kṛṣṇa's final argument was that of pure self-interest: 'We are indeed tied to the Pāṇḍavas in this world through marriage, affection and friendship. On their growth depends our growth. Do not, O bull amongst men, be angered.'³ We, then, have the anomalous situation of Balarāma lecturing Kṛṣṇa on *dharma*. An unimpressed Balarāma replies that there must be a balance between *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*; and no matter what Kṛṣṇa might say, Bhīma had got the balance wrong. Kṛṣṇa's only response is to remind his brother that the *Kali* age was

1) *Māyāvinam ca rājānam māyayaiva nikṛntatu*// *ibid.*, 57.7. Also see 57.1-17.

2) *Ibid.*, 57.18-44.

3) *Yaunairhārdaicça sambandhaiḥ sambaddhāḥ smeha pāṇḍavaiḥ/*

Teṣāṃ vṛddhyābhivṛddhirno mā krudhaḥ puruṣarṣabha// *ibid.*, 59.16. Also 59.12-16.

at hand.' To conclude our analysis of Viṣṇu's role as a predetermining agent in the affairs of the triple-world, it is worth recalling that God incarnate purportedly descends into the triple-world to restore the ascendancy of *dharma*!

In other parts of the *Mahābhārata* it is Śiva who is looked upon as the supreme God who is responsible for creation, preservation, and destruction. Thus Śiva, like Brahmā and Viṣṇu, is viewed as a sort of supreme overseer who supervises the fragile balance that constitutes the triple-world. And, similarly, for mortals the effect of Śiva's actions on behalf of the triple-world can more or less constitute the working of destiny.

However, compared to Brahmā and Viṣṇu, less attention is given to Śiva's role as a preserver, and more to his role as a destroyer. This is in keeping with Śiva's more original and essential nature. As Gonda puts it: 'The essence of Rudra-Śiva was, in the minds of ancient Indian man, the power of the uncultivated and unconquered, dangerous and unreliable nature, experienced as a divinity.'² In this destructive capacity, Śiva may seem to be even more an agent of destiny than Viṣṇu and Brahmā, for the fact of death and destruction serve to fuel belief in destiny and fate. And

1) *Ibid.*, 59.17-21. It is interesting to note that the dying Duryodhana reviled Kṛṣṇa for the tactics he had used in the destruction of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Bhūriṣravas, Karna, and Duryodhana himself; and charged that if they had fought fairly victory would never have been theirs. Kṛṣṇa responds not by defending his own conduct, but by cataloguing Duryodhana's sins. And when Duryodhana's words receive a chorus of evident approval from heaven, the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa were put to shame (*vriḍāṃupāgaman*). Aware that Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karna and Bhūriṣravas had been slain unrighteously (*hatāṅcādharmataḥ*), they were afflicted by grief (*çokārtāḥ*). To revive their spirits, Kṛṣṇa finally had recourse to the argument of sheer necessity. All of them, said Kṛṣṇa, were great charioteers, and the Pāṇḍavas could not have slain them in battle by a fair fight (*ṛjuyuddhena*). Without these stratagems (*upāyāḥ*) the Pāṇḍavas would never have been victorious. In any case, when the number of one's enemies became excessive (*adhikāḥ*), then they should be slain by deceitful means (*mithyāvadyāḥ*): 'The gods of old followed this way in slaying the *asuras*. And the path followed by the virtuous (gods) may be followed by all.'

Pūrvairanugato mārgo devairasuraghātibhiḥ/

Sadbhiṣcānugataḥ panthāḥ sa sarvairanugamyate// (62) See *ibid.*, 60.27-62.

2) 'The Hindu Trinity' in J. Gonda, *Selected Studies*, vol.4, p.214. Compare, too, Brandon's view: 'In Śiva, the ambivalence of deity according to Indian notions, is seen in its most impressive form.' Brandon, *op.cit.*, p.35.

as the great God most associated with destruction, Īiva's actions may often seem ambivalent and unpredictable, again important characteristics of fate. If the actions of Viṣṇu and Brahmā may constitute the working of destiny in a benevolent and friendly form, Īiva's actions represent it in its more malevolent and unpredictable form.

Īiva, too, is much concerned with maintaining the ascendancy of order and *dharma* over disorder and *adharma*; and he too acts as the ultimate resort of the gods whenever there is a threat to the ascendancy of *dharma*, and the welfare of other beings in the triple-world. At the behest of Brahmā and the gods, Īiva intervenes when the ecstatic dancing of the great seer Mañkaṇaka threatened the stability of the triple-world.¹ Īiva is also responsible for the fathering of Skanda, who in turn saved the gods from the great demon Tāraka;² and he slew other demons himself such as Andhaka.³ At the behest of the gods, and out of desire for the welfare of the gods (*devānāṃ hitakāmyayā*),⁴ perhaps Īiva's major exploit in the Epic is the destruction of Tripura, the triple-city of the demons.

In this myth, related principally in the *Kaṇṇaparvan* by Duryodhana, there was a great battle between the *asuras* led by Tāraka and the gods in which the celestials were successful. Now Tāraka had three sons, Tārakākṣa, Kamalākṣa and Vidyunmālin, and after the defeat of the demons they undertook terrible austerities (*tapsa ugraṃ samāsthāya*). Then the Grandfather, that giver of boons, became pleased (*prīto*) with their self-control, austerities and observances (*damena tapasā caiva niyamena*). The demons, as always, sought the boon that they should be inviolable (*avadhyatvaṃ*) to all beings. But Brahmā bade them seek another boon, saying that there was no immortality for creatures (*nāstī sarvāmaratvaṃ*). After much thought the demons chose that they should, living in three separate cities, wander over the universe for

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 81.97-114.

2) Ālyaparvan, 43.1 ff. In the Āraṇyakaparvan version (214.1-22), paternity belongs to Agni.

3) Droṇaparvan, 172.65.

4) *Ibid.*, 173.56.

a thousand years, whereupon the three cities would all come together as one. And if any celestial should penetrate with a single arrow those cities united into one, then that would become their death. Brahmā said 'Let it be so'. The three demons then had Maya, the celestial architect (*viçvakarman*) construct a city of gold for Tārakākṣa, a city of silver for Kamalākṣa, and a city of iron for Vidyunmālin. And they disdained Prajāpati, the Lord of Creatures, and with their energy (*tejasā*) they attacked the three worlds.¹

Now, to further strengthen their position, the demon Tārakākṣa, ruler of the city of gold, again performed the most severe austerities (*tapastepe paramakam*), and when Brahmā was satisfied (*tuṣṭam*) he besought the boon that there should be a lake in their city in which whosoever was struck down by weapons, when cast in would emerge stronger. Thereafter, whatever *daiṭya* was slain, when dipped in this lake, came alive again. Crazed by the boons they had been given (*varadānena darpitāḥ*), those demons wandered at will having put to flight the gods and their retinues; and covetous and full of folly, they plundered all the settlements in the universe.²

Thereupon all the gods as a body went to the Grandfather to ask the means for the destruction of the *asuras*. Having heard the gods, Brahmā commended that they seek out Sthānu, also known as Īcāna and Jīṣṇu, who would slaughter the *asuras*. All the gods and *ṛṣis*, with Brahmā at their head, approached Bhava with all their soul (*bhavam sarvātmanā gatāḥ*). Then they praised that God and bowed down to the unborn Lord of the universe (*ajam jagataḥ patim*). Pleased, Īcāna asked what he could do for the gods. Seeking his grace (*kuru prasādam*) the gods bade him slaughter their enemies, the *dānavas*. Īcāna replied: 'My opinion is that all your enemies should be slain. But I alone am not able to slay the enemies of the gods.'³ Therefore he

1) Kārṇaparvan, 24.3-19.

2) *Ibid.*, 24.20-28.

3) Hantavyāḥ çatravaḥ sarve yuṣmākamiti me matiḥ/

Na tveko ahaṃ vadhe teṣāṃ samartho vai suradviṣāṃ// *ibid.*, 24.57.

advised that all the gods, united together, should destroy their enemies with one half of his energy and strength (*mama tejobalārdhena*). However, the gods replied that the energy and strength of the *dānavas* was twice that of the gods, and nor were they capable of bearing half *Çiva*'s strength. Instead, they bade *Çiva* slaughter the *dānavas* with one half of their strength. To this *Çiva* agreed and thence he became more powerful than all others in strength and became called *Mahādeva*.

The gods constructed for *Çiva* a mighty chariot from the various forms (*mūrtis*) of the triple-world and the gods themselves (e.g. Mt. Mandara was the axle), and then *Çiva* placed his celestial weapons upon it and readied it for battle. Donning his armour, and armed with his bow, *Çiva* took up a divine arrow produced from (*sambhavam*) Soma, Viṣṇu and Agni, and with Brahmā himself as his charioteer he rode forth towards the triple-city that was protected by the *daityas* and *dānavas*. Then, as *Çiva* aimed that arrow, along with his *pāçupata* weapon, those three cities became of one nature again (*ekībhāvam*). *Çiva* shot that arrow, made of the essence of the three worlds (*trailokyasāram*), and having burnt those hosts of *asuras* he cast them into the western ocean. And 'Thus those three cities were burnt, and the *dānavas* completely (destroyed) by the enraged Maheçvara who desired to benefit the triple-world.'¹

However, while *Çiva* will aid the gods because they ultimately represent the forces of order and *dharma*, in keeping with the ambivalent aspects of *Çiva*'s nature the relationship is certainly not trouble free. For instance, one of *Çiva*'s major exploits in the Epic is the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice when the gods denied him a share. For good measure, *Çiva* also tore out Bhaga's eyes, broke Savitr's arm,

1) *Evam tattṛipuraṃ dagdhaṃ dānavāçcāpyaçeṣataḥ/
Maheçvareṇa kruddhena trailokyasya hitaiṣiṇā// ibid., 24.121.*

and kicked out Pūṣan's teeth.¹ Īṣa, too, seems to take a special satisfaction in putting Indra, the prideful and lustful king of gods, in his place.² Īṣa's newly wedded wife Umā also cursed the gods to be sterile after they interrupted her love-making with the great God. Not unnaturally, the gods feared the offspring that such a union might produce.³ Whereas the relationship of the gods with Viṣṇu and Brahmā is close and friendly, Īṣa is an outsider who stands apart from the other beings in the triple-world with the telling exception of the hosts of deformed and terrible goblins who accompany him. For instance, in Mārkaṇḍeya's description of the divine halls, Īṣa appears in Kubera's Hall where he sits with his Goddess surrounded by 'hideous, hunch-backed dwarfs, blood-eyed, swift as thought, who feast on lard, fat and flesh, and who are terrible to hear and see.'⁴

Īṣa's ambivalent characteristics are probably even more marked in his relations with mortal beings. Admittedly Īṣa does occasionally appear as a benevolent and friendly god. For instance, another of Īṣa's major exploits in the Epic is when he agrees to break the fall of the mighty Gaṅgā as it descended from heaven to earth.⁵ In the central drama of the Epic, it is Īṣa who, after being appropriately honoured by Draupadī, bestows upon her the crucial boon of five husbands; even if this was somewhat more than she had asked for.⁶ Īṣa is even known to appear as a kind and loving god full of grace for his devotees; though this is more typical of Īṣa in the post-Epic period⁷ than in the Epic. For instance, when the Pāṇḍavas come to the *tīrtha* of Rudrakotī, Pulastya relates that once a crore of seers came there desirous of being the first to see Īṣa. So that the seers would not become angry, Īṣa created a crore of Rudras so that each seer would believe that he had seen the God

1) See Aranyakaparvan, 114.7-10, Droṇaparvan, 173.42-51, Sautikaparvan, 18.1-24, Īāntiparvan, 274.1-43, Anuṣāsanaparvan, 145.11-23.

2) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 145.30-34. 3) *Ibid.*, 83.40-52.

4) Vāmanairvikāṭaiḥ kubjaiḥ kṣatajāksairmanojavaiḥ//
Mānsamedovasāhārairugraçraṇaḍarçanaḥ/ Sabhāparvan, 10.21-22. Also see Sautikaparvan, 7.15-45.

5) See Aranyakaparvan, 107-108. 6) Ādiparvan, 189.41-46.

7) See O'Flaherty, *Problem of Evil ... op.cit.*, pp.78-93.

first. Satisfied by the supreme devotion (*bhakti* *paramayā*) of the seers, *Çiva* bestowed the boon that they would hereafter increase in *dharma* (*dharma* *vṛddhir*).¹ *Çiva* also showed exemplary grace (*prasāda*) to the seer *Mañkanaka* after he had sought the God's forgiveness for his rush of pride.² Elsewhere *Çiva* favours various seers who turn to him in devotion when they incur difficulties and troubles,³ and the sage *Vyāsa*, author of the *Mahābhārata*, when he propitiates *Çiva* for a son.⁴ As well, in the *Çantiparvan* myth concerning the origin of death, it is the compassion filled *Çiva* who beseeches from the angry *Brahmā* the boon that creatures should not be destroyed outright but should be subject to repeated birth.⁵

However, in his relationship with mortals, *Çiva* more normally appears where there is conflict or destruction in the offing. It is significant that mankind also suffered from *Çiva*'s rage at the destruction of *Dakṣa*'s sacrifice for in the process the great God secreted sweat which became embodied as fever. After the great God had been pacified with a sacrificial share, *Brahmā* warned that the earth could not endure the energy of Fever if it remained in one form. Therefore *Çiva* divided Fever into many parts and distributed these ailments amongst men, animals, and the earth.⁶ However, it is in the central drama of the *Mahābhārata* that the destructive aspects of *Çiva*'s relationship with mortals is most evident.

The *Çaivites*, too, place the main story of the *Mahābhārata* within their own cosmic setting, though it is less clearly developed than those pertaining to *Viṣṇu* and *Brahmā*. In the *Ādiparvan*, it is related how King *Drupada* was quite shocked at the proposal that all the *Pāṇḍavas* should be the wedded husbands of his sole daughter. However, the sage *Vyāsa* set out to convince him that this was not a flagrant breach of the *dharma*. To this end he related how once at a sacrifice the

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 81.106-114.

3) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 18.1-41.

5) See above p.130.

6) *Ibid.*, 274.46-56..

2) See below p.338.

4) *Çāntiparvan*, 310.11-28.

gods saw a lotus floating down the Gaṅgā. Going to investigate, Indra saw a woman crying and each of her tear drops became a lotus of gold. Indra questioned her as to who she was and why she wept. She offered to show him why and led him a short way to where he saw a handsome youth seated on a lion-throne in the company of young women, playing dice on the top of the king of mountains. When the youth, absorbed in the game, ignored him the enraged (*samanyur*) Indra proclaimed: 'Know that I am the king of gods! The entire world stands in my power. I am the lord!' The young God merely laughed (*jahāsa*) at Indra, who immediately became rigid (*saṁstambhito*) like a post (*sthāpuriva*). And when he had finished the game, the young God bade the weeping goddess bring Indra closer so that 'pride should never possess him again.'² But touched by the goddess Indra's limbs went limp and he fell on the ground, where he heard the blessed Lord of terrible energy (*bhagavānugratejā*) proclaim: 'Çakra, never do this again!'³ Then the God commanded Indra to roll back this mighty king of mountains and to enter the cave at its centre. Indra rolled back the mountain where, to his horror, he saw four more Indras. Widening his eyes in anger, the God ordered him to enter with them 'for from folly you have slighted me formerly.'⁴ Indra was duly shaken, and with hands folded and face bowed down beseeched the blessed Lord for a way out. The God merely laughed again and said: 'You shall all enter a human womb. There you shall perform unbearable deeds (and) lead many others to annihilation.'⁵ After that they would again go to the precious world of Indra. Then the four previous Indras (*pūrvendrās*) beseeched that the gods Dharma, Vāyu, Indra and the Aṣvins should beget them on their mother, while the present Indra volunteered that with his seed he would beget

1) *devarājo mamedam tvam viddhi viçvam bhuvanam vaçe sthitam/ Īço ahamasmīti samanyurabravīd ... Ādiparvan*, 189.15.

2) *mainam darpaḥ punarapyāviçeta*, *ibid.*, 189.17.

3) *maivam punaḥ çakra kṛthāḥ kathamcīt*, *ibid.*, 189.18.

4) *yanmām bālyādavamaṁsthāḥ purastāt*, *ibid.*, 189.21.

5) *yonim sarve mānuṣīmāviçadhvam/*

Tatra yūyam karma kṛtvāviçahyam

bahūnanyānnidhanam prāpayitvā// ibid., 189.25.

a mortal who would be his son. The blessed Lord granted their desire, and ordained that Çrī should be their wife amongst men. Then the young God and the five Indras approached the immeasurable Nārāyaṇa who also ordained all this, whereupon the five Indras were born on earth. Then Hari plucked two hairs from his head, a white one, and a black one. When the white one was placed in Rohiṇī it became Baladeva, while the black one, when placed in Devakī, became Keçava. Finally Vyāsa revealed that the five Indras were born on earth as the Pāṇḍavas, with Arjuna being Çakra's portion (*çakrasyāñçaḥ*) while Çrī was born as their wife Draupadī.¹

As well as uncompromisingly asserting the superiority of the 'new' great God Çiva over the old king of gods Indra, this myth seems to cleverly 'hijack' the Vaiṣṇavite framework to the *Mahābhārata*, though in a somewhat remodelled form. In the Vaiṣṇavite version the divine origin of the Pāṇḍavas is due to the curse on Pāṇḍu and Kuntī's timely boon, combined with the need to rid earth of its oppressive load of demons or *kṣatriyas*. In the Çaivite version it is due to the insolence and pride of successive Indras. However, the purpose of the unbearable deeds of destruction the five Indras are to perform is nowhere specified. In the Vaiṣṇavite version the Pāṇḍavas are only a 'part' or 'portion' of the God; in the Çaivite version they would seem to be the five Indras themselves reborn, though logically this should mean that the Indra of the present fathers not a son but himself!

In other Çaivite sections, Kṛṣṇa's divine origins and mission upon earth are again given due recognition; but Kṛṣṇa is reduced to the position of being an agent of Çiva, just as Brahmā had become an agent of Viṣṇu. Thus in the *Droṇaparvan* it is related that 'He that is called Nārāyaṇa is the first-born of even the ancient ones. And the creator of the universe, the son of *dharma*, was born (on Earth) for accomplishing a purpose.'² But before setting out to achieve this purpose, Kṛṣṇa undertook severe *tapas* (*tapastivramātasthe*) on Mount Maināka. For more than sixty-

1) *Ibid.*, 189.9-33.

2) *Yo asau nārāyaṇo nāma pūrveṣāmapī pūrvajaḥ/
Ajāyata ca kāryārthaṁ putro dharmasya viçvakṛt//Droṇaparvan, 172.51.*

thousand years Kṛṣṇa stood there emaciating himself by subsisting on air alone. And then he performed other austerities for twice that period, filling the space between heaven and earth with his energy (*tejasā*). Through these austerities, Kṛṣṇa succeeded in beholding Rudra, the Lord of the universe (*jagataḥ patim*), the origin of all (*yonim viṣvasya*) and the Lord of all the gods (*sarvadevairapīṣvaram*), who is exceedingly difficult to see (*bhṛṣadurdarṣaṁ*), and so on. Then, filled with devotion (*bhaktimān*) at the sight, Kṛṣṇa honoured (*abhituṣṭāva*) the God with praises. At the conclusion, Kṛṣṇa beseeched Īiva: 'Praised (by me), grant me the boons I desire which are difficult to attain.'

And so the blue-throated God (*nīlakaṇṭhaḥ*) gave boons that assured Kṛṣṇa's power and ascendancy in the triple-world: 'O Nārāyaṇa, through my grace, amongst those born of men, gods and *gandharvas*, you shall be of immeasurable might and soul. Neither gods, *asuras*, great snakes, *piṣācas*, *gandharvas*, men, nor *rākṣasas* shall be a match for you.'² Having attained these boons 'that god (Nārāyaṇa) wandered (the earth) deluding the world with his supernatural power.'³ Now from Nārāyaṇa's austerities, there was born a great *muni* called Nara, who was none other than Arjuna; and in age after age they took birth for the sake of the order and maintenance of the worlds (*lokayātrāvidhānārthaṁ saṁjāyete yuge yuge*).⁴ But the power by which Kṛṣṇa achieved his purpose on Earth was ultimately drawn from Īiva.

The Kṛṣṇa *avatāra* is again subordinated to Īiva in the *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, though by a less direct means. In this instance, Kṛṣṇa offers house and hospitality to the greatly erratic and bad-tempered seer Durvāsas. Kṛṣṇa and his wife Rukmiṇī are put to the severest test, but endure all mistreatment without the least sign of hostility. Durvāsas then rewarded them with suitable boons: as long as men should be

1) Sudurlābhāndehi varānnameṣṭānabhiṣṭutaḥ ... *ibid.*, 172.72.

2) Matprasādānmanuṣyeṣu devagandharvayoniṣu/
Aprameyabalātmā tvaṁ nārāyaṇa bhaviṣyasi//
Na ca tvā prasahiṣyanti devāsura mahoragāḥ/
Na piṣācā na gandharvā na narā na ca rākṣasāḥ// *ibid.*, 172.74-75.

3) Sa eṣa devaṣcarati māyayā mohayañ jagat// *ibid.*, 172.79.

4) *Ibid.*, 172.51-81.

attached to food, so long would they have affection for Kṛṣṇa; as long as their should be virtue (*puṇya*) in the world, so long should Kṛṣṇa's fame (*kīrtis*) last; Kṛṣṇa would be very agreeable to all persons (*supriyaḥ sarvalokasya*); and as long as Kṛṣṇa desired to live he need not fear death assailing those parts of his body which he had smeared with milk-rice as earlier instructed by Durvāsas (Kṛṣṇa had covered all parts of his body save the soles of his feet).¹ However, this brahmin seer Durvāsas was no ordinary seer; for it is then explained how formerly Rudra had taken birth as Durvāsas and lived in Kṛṣṇa's house at Dvāravatī.² Kṛṣṇa's fame, popularity and (virtual) invulnerability are then ultimately derived from Śiva.

A difficulty in these accounts is that it is not made fully clear what Śiva's purpose is. According to the first version, Kṛṣṇa takes birth on earth for the sake of the order and maintenance of the worlds; and we must presume that in supporting Kṛṣṇa, Śiva is supporting these ends. However, when Śiva's actions with respect to the central drama are examined, there is cause for doubt as to how the order and maintenance of the worlds is to be achieved. Just as Brahmā and Viṣṇu are seen to direct the course of events through their ordinances, boons and tactical manipulation, so is Śiva seen to direct events through his boons, and through personally entering the fray himself. But the difficulty is that in the great battle and its aftermath, Śiva, the destroyer, freely brings death and destruction to both sides. The only consistent explanation is that in the Śaivite view, too, the order of the triple-world is to be achieved by ridding earth of its oppressive load of *kṣatriyas*. This of course presumes that there is a consistent explanation to be found.

In the central drama of the *Mahābhārata*, Śiva stands out as the giver of 'dubious' boons to those bent on destructive purposes. Some of these boons, it must be admitted, do further the cause of the Pāṇḍavas. For instance, it was to Śiva that Princess Ambā turned in her desire to become a man so that she could destroy

1) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 144.12-39.

2) *Ibid.*, 145.34-35.

Bhīṣma; for Bhīṣma had ruined her marital prospects by abducting the princess from her *svayamvara*. For fourteen years the princess heated up heaven and earth (*tāpayāmāsa rodasī*) with her austerities, as well as visiting many holy hermitages and sacred fords. Then Rudra appeared to her and proffered a boon. She chose Bhīṣma's defeat, and Çiva avowed she would become a great warrior in the house of Drupada, and so slay Bhīṣma in battle. So while the great seers looked on, Ambā gathered firewood, made a high pyre, and set fire to it. With her heart blazing with wrath (*roṣadīptena cetasā*), she entered the fire saying 'for Bhīṣma's death' (*uktvā bhīṣmavadhāyati*).¹

In the meantime, King Drupada was also intent on exacting revenge on Bhīṣma, but his wife was without sons. Therefore Drupada, too, turned to Çiva undertaking grim austerities (*tapo ghoram samāsthitaḥ*) to satisfy Çiva (*toṣayāmāsa çamkaram*) and so obtain a son. In due time Çiva appeared and bestowed a man child who was a woman (*striṇpumāṇste bhaviṣyati*). Now Drupada repeatedly pleaded for a son, but Çiva said: 'It is ordained. It shall not be otherwise, for so it must be.'² In this context it is not entirely clear whether it is Çiva who acts as an agent of fate ordaining what must be, or whether Çiva is subordinate to what is determined by a higher power. Whatever the case, through these boons, the princess Ambā is reborn as Çikhaṇḍin who, after a complicated sexual trade with an obliging *yakṣa*, becomes a man.³ And Çikhaṇḍin becomes the direct cause of Bhīṣma's death for the grandfather of the Kurus had vowed never to fight a woman.

Çiva also helps the Pāṇḍava's cause by bestowing on Arjuna the boon of the dreadful Pāçupata weapon, which at the end of the age would destroy the entire world. This was by way of reward after Çiva, in the disguise of a mountain hunter, had fought a tremendous battle with Arjuna to test his gallantry.⁴

On the other hand, when King Jayadratha was humiliated by the Pāṇḍavas after

1) See Udyogaparvan, 187.19-188.18.

2) *Ibid.*, 189.8; and 189.1-8.

3) See *ibid.*, 192.17-30, 193.1-6.

4) Aranyakaparvan, 40.1-41.26.

his abduction of Draupadī, it is to Çiva that he too turns. After Jayadratha had performed severe austerities, Çiva became pleased (*prīto*) with him and proffered a boon. Jayadratha chose that he should be able to conquer in battle all five Pāṇḍavas on their chariots. This Çiva refused for the Pāṇḍavas were unconquerable and unslayable in battle. Instead Çiva gave him the power to hold off the Pāṇḍavas in battle, save Arjuna who was protected by Kṛṣṇa.¹ The consequence of this boon was the destruction in battle of Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and nephew of Kṛṣṇa. As Yudhiṣṭhira sadly lamented over his dead nephew: 'So, this one of highly virtuous nature went to his ordained end.'²

Even more significant is the fact that the origins of Duryodhana are also attributable to Çiva. After Duryodhana and his supporters, intent on humiliating the Pāṇḍavas in their forest retreat, had in turn been totally humiliated at the hands of the *gandharvas* and the Pāṇḍavas, the king became resolved on religious suicide and the attainment of heaven. However, the *daityas* and *dānavas* became desperate at the intention of their principal agent on earth. Summoning him to the netherworld (*rasātalam*) by means of a magical rite, they set about pumping some fortitude into Duryodhana by enlightening him about his divine nature, and about the creation of his body. As they explained:

Formerly we obtained you with our austerities from the divine Great Lord. And the whole upper part of your body was created from piles of diamonds. Impenetrable to arrows and swords, your lower body is also faultless. Formed of flowers, it was made by the Goddess (and) in form it is captivating to women. Thus your body, O best of kings, is conjoined to both the Lord and the Goddess, O tiger amongst kings. For you are divine, not human.³

'Great Lord' may, of course, be an epithet for either Çiva or Viṣṇu; but in this context it must refer to Çiva. The reference to the Goddess would further suggest

1) *Ibid.*, 256.25-29.

2) *Tataḥ paramadharmātmā diṣṭāntamupajagmivān*// *Dronaparvan*, 51.14.

3) *Purā tvaṃ tapasāsmābhirlabdho devānmaheçvarāt*/
Pūrvakāyaçca sarvaste nirmīto vajrasaṃcayaiḥ//
Astrairabhedyah çastraiçcāpyadhaḥkāyaçca te anaghaḥ/
Kṛtaḥ puṣpamayo devyā rūpataḥ strīmanoharah//
Evamiçvarasaṃyuktastava deho nṛpottama/
Devyā ca rājaçārdūla divyastvaṃ hi na mānuṣaḥ// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 240.6-8.

this; and, in any case, if it were not, Viṣṇu's avatāra as Kṛṣṇa would make precious little sense.

In some parts of the text, Īiva is even pictured as participating in the conflict itself so as to bring about a desired result. Again, the significant point is that Īiva's forays bring destruction to both sides. Thus, in the *Droṇaparvan*, Arjuna recounts to the sage Vyāsa how, when he was slaying his enemies in battle, he beheld before him (*agrato*) a person who was radiant like fire (*puruṣaṃ pāvaka-prabham*), and whose feet did not touch the ground. And wheresoever he proceeded with his blazing lance uplifted, Arjuna's enemies were broken (*viṣīryante ṣatravo me*); for, because of his energy (*tejasā*) thousands of lances issued from that lance. Though Arjuna seemed to destroy his enemies, following on behind this being, Arjuna actually only destroyed those already destroyed by him. Vyāsa, of course, explains that Arjuna had seen Īiva, that mighty Lord of all the worlds (*sarvalokeṣvaram prabhum*).¹

However, if during the battle Īiva helps the Pāṇḍavas to destroy the Kauravas, after the battle Īiva helps the Kaurava remnants to destroy the victorious Pāṇḍava forces. After Duryodhana had been foully brought down in personal combat with Bhīmasena, only Kṛpa, Kṛtavarma and Droṇa's son Aṣvatthāman remained active from the Kauravas' once immense army. As the three warriors rested for the night beneath a huge banyan tree, Aṣvatthāman alone remained awake. Possessed by wrath and indignation (*krodhāmarṣavaṇam*) at the foul tactics employed by the Pāṇḍavas, Aṣvatthāman observed a terrible owl quietly slaughter many crows who slept unaware in that tree. Aṣvatthāman reflected on this terrible deed and concluded that if he were to fight the Pāṇḍavas fairly (*nyāyato*) he would never win; but if he were to use deceit (*chadmanā*) he might yet succeed. Though Aṣvatthāman was fully aware of what a terrible deed slaughtering the victorious Pāṇḍavas in their sleep would be, he consoled himself with the thought that at every step the Pāṇḍavas had committed

1) *Droṇaparvan*, 173.4-9.

deeds that were censurable (*nīnditāni*), contemptible (*kutsitāni*) and deceitful (*sopadhāni*).¹

However, as Aṣvatthāman approached the Pāṇḍava camp he saw the entrance guarded by a being of huge form with the brilliance of the sun and the moon. For his upper garment he wore a black deer skin, and for his lower, a blood stained tiger-skin. For his sacred thread and armlets, he wore huge snakes. His face had a thousand strange (*vicitrair*) eyes, while his wide open mouth looked fearful (*bhayāvaham*) with terrible tusks and blazing flames of fire. Out of his eyes, his mouth, nose and ears, huge flames came forth (*prādurāsanmahārciṣaḥ*), and from those flames hundreds and thousands of Hṛṣīkeṣas appeared armed with conches, discuses and clubs.

Seeing that tremendous vision of Kṛṣṇa's divine form, Aṣvatthāman fearlessly assailed it with his own divine weapons, but all to no effect. And then, when all his weapons were spent Aṣvatthāman saw the sky entirely covered with images of Janārdana.² Aṣvatthāman then reflected on his own wickedness:

This huge being is like the uplifted divine rod of punishment. Even observing (it) in all ways, I do not recognise this (being). (But) assuredly it is the outcome of my foul determination (which is founded) in unrighteousness. This terrible fruit of (my foul determination) has appeared to ward me off. Therefore my ceasing from battle has been ordained by destiny.³

It is not entirely clear from the text whether this tremendous image is intended to be an actual appearance of Kṛṣṇa's divine form, or a symbolic manifestation of Aṣvatthāman's guilty conscience. Whatever the case, Aṣvatthāman was not about to let divine images and adverse destiny deter him. Appropriately enough - for Aṣvatthāman

1) Sautikaparvan, 1.32-49.

2) Apaṣyatkr̥tamākāṣamanākāṣaṃ janārdanaḥ// *ibid.*, 6.17.

3) Idam ca sumahadbhūtaṃ daivadaṇḍamivodyatam/
Na caṭṭadabhiḥjñāmi cintayannapi sarvathā//
Dhruvaṃ yeyamadharma me pravṛttā kaluṣā matiḥ/
Tasyāḥ phalamidaṃ ghoraṃ pratighātāya dṛṣyate//
Tadidaṃ daivavihitam mama saṃkhye nivartanam/ *ibid.*, 6.29-31.

was a particle of Çiva - he sought the protection (*çaraṇam*) of the powerful Mahādeva 'for he will destroy this terrible rod of divine punishment.'

So, after lauding the great God with various praises, Açvatthāman offered up to Çiva the ultimate sacrificial offering, that of his own body. Seeing him standing within the flames as the offering with his arms uplifted, the smiling (*hasan*) Mahādeva appeared to him, and said: 'With truth, purity, honesty, renunciation, austerities, restraints, patience, devotion, constancy, thought and word, I have been properly worshipped by Kṛṣṇa of pure deeds. Therefore there is none dearer to me than Kṛṣṇa.'² And it was to honour Kṛṣṇa (*kurvatā tasya saṁmānam*) that he had protected the Pāñcalas. However, Çiva concluded: 'But they have been overcome by Time; now there is no life left to them.'³ Then Çiva entered the body (*tanumāviveça*) of Açvatthāman, and gave him a most excellent sword (*khaṅgamuttamam*); and, 'now possessed by the Lord, he blazed mightily with energy.'⁴ And many invisible beings and *rākṣasas* accompanied Açvatthāman as he went forth like the Lord himself (*sākṣādiveçvaram*). Then Açvatthāman moved through the camp killing all the mighty Pāṇḍava forces either with his sword, or with his hands and feet as if they were animals.⁵ Only the absent Kṛṣṇa, Sātyaki and Pāṇḍava brothers remained alive.

There is no doubt that in these terrible deeds, Açvatthāman is merely the instrument of Çiva's destructive divine power.⁶ But of special interest is the imagery used to describe Açvatthāman. According to the text, 'of terrible appearance,

1) Daivadaṇḍamimaṁ ghoram sa hi me nāçayīṣyati// *ibid.*, 6.32. Also see 6.32-34.

2) Satyaçaucarjavatyāgaistapasā niyamena ca/
Kṣāntyā bhaktyā ca dhṛtyā ca buddhyā ca vacasā tathā//
Yathāvadahaṁārāddhaḥ kṛṣṇenākliṣṭakarmaṇā/
Tasmādiṣṭatamaḥ kṛṣṇādanyo mama na vidyate// *ibid.*, 7.60-61.

3) Abhibhūtāstu kālena naiṣāmanyāsti jīvitam// *ibid.*, 7.63.

4) Athāviṣṭo bhagavatā bhūyo jajvāla tejasā/ *ibid.*, 7.65.

5) *Ibid.*, 7.66.

6) Note, too, that Kṛṣṇa later explains to Yudhiṣṭhira that Açvatthāman could single-handedly slay all these mighty warriors only because he had sought the help (*jagāma çaraṇam*) of Mahādeva, the eternal God of gods. (*Sauptikaparvan*, 17.1-7) Kṛṣṇa also assures Yudhiṣṭhira that 'that was not done by the son of Droṇa. It (was) through the grace of Mahādeva.' (*na hi taddraupinā kṛtam/ Mahādevaprasādaḥ sa ... ibid.*, 18.26)

he moved about in the camp like Time';¹ and, 'all his limbs wet with blood, he was like Death begotten by Time.'² Even more vividly, Aṣvatthāman is seen to represent the dread goddess of destruction: 'They saw the Night of all-destroying Time, a black goddess with bloody eyes and mouth, wearing red garlands and a single red garment, with hair tufted and a noose in her hand.'³ On other nights, too, since the beginning of the battle, the leading Pāṇḍava warriors had seen in their dreams this dread figure leading away warriors from their sleep, with Droṇa's son constantly striking them down. And so, 'Droṇa's son struck down afterwards those previously slain by fate.'⁴ From the point of view of the victims, it would seem that Īiva's destructive divine power constitutes the dread workings of dark fate.

Many of the statements in the *Mahābhārata* concerning predestination are attributed not to one of the three great Gods, but to personalised abstractions, especially the Placer (Dhātṛ) and the Ordainer (Vidhātṛ). These terms would seem to be traceable to the Vedic tradition where Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ belong to a group of so-called abstract agent or functional gods whose names express the function which they perform. According to Keith, the origin of these agent gods is as follows:

In all the cases which are to be found in the Vedic literature we are able to say with a fair degree of plausibility that the conception formed itself from the use of the epithet in question in the first place of some concrete god, and then, after denoting that deity in the special field of action, it was gradually made into a separate deity concerned merely with the sphere of action in question.⁵

However popular some agent gods such as Tvaṣṭṛ and Prajāpati may have become, Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ were only of 'very minor importance':

Dhātṛ, the creator, is a development, only found about a dozen times, and only once outside the tenth book, of the epithet creator, applied to Indra or Viṣvakarman, and often used of the priests as establishers of the sacrifice. He is the creator of the heaven, air, earth, sun and moon, is besought to grant offspring, a clear eye, a length of days, and in the post-Vedic period is a synonym of Brahman or Prajāpati as the all-god. Vidhātṛ, 'disposer', is used with Dhātṛ as an epithet of Indra and Viṣvakarman once each: it in two enumerations attains a slight existence.⁶

1) Sa ghorarūpo vyacaratkālavacchibire, *ibid.*, 8.44.

2) Rudhīrokṣitasarvāṅgaḥ kālasṛṣṭa ivāntakaḥ// *ibid.*, 8.39.

3) Kālīm raktāśyanayanām raktamālyānulepanām/

Raktāmbāradharāmekām pāṇḍavastām cikhaṇḍīm//

Dadṛṣuḥ kālarātriṃ te ...

ibid., 8.64-65.

4) Tānstu daivahatānpūrvam paṇḍāddraṇirnyapātayat/ *ibid.*, 8.68.

5) A.B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, vol.1, p.203.

6) *Ibid.*, p.206.

Given that they are of little importance in the Vedic literature, Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ are perhaps mentioned with some frequency whenever groupings of Vedic gods are mentioned in the Epic. For instance, when Vaiṣampāyana recounts in the *Ādiparvan* the origin of all creatures he mentions that the twelve Ādityas, who include Dhātṛ, were born from Aditi.¹ In the very next chapter Vaiṣampāyana explains - without any hint of inconsistency - that Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ were sons of Brahmā.² As the other Vedic gods are at best only grandsons, it is a position of surprising eminence for these seemingly obscure Vedic gods. During the destruction of the Khāṇḍava Forest by Agni, the seer Mandapālā praises the God of Fire so that he would spare the seer's four fledgling sons, the Çārṅgaka birds. In his praise, Mandapālā identifies Agni with various Vedic gods, including Dhātṛ.³ Dhātṛ, too, stands up with many other Vedic gods to greet the birth of Arjuna.⁴ On their tour of the *tīrthas*, the Pāṇḍavas come to the Ford of Çūrpāraka where they saw the holy places of various Vedic gods, again including Dhātṛ.⁵ And along with Indra, Tvaṣṭṛ and Dhātṛ are mentioned as the makers of the celestial flag that adorned Arjuna's chariot.⁶ Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ are both listed amongst the various Vedic gods who attend Skanda's investiture as general of the god's army; and they too give Skanda various attendants (*anucarān*) for his army.⁷ In the *Çāntiparvan*, Arjuna lectures Yudhiṣṭhira that it is only the gods who kill that are worshipped by men. Dhātṛ is included amongst those who do not kill, and hence who are no longer worshipped.⁸ Elsewhere in the *Çāntiparvan* the twelve Ādityas are mentioned, including Dhātṛ, in another listing of Vedic gods.⁹ In the *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, Dhātṛ is amongst the various Vedic gods who come to see the newly-born Skanda.¹⁰

In these instances, Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ are merely members of the Vedic pack, so

1) *Ādiparvan*, 59.14-15.

3) *Ibid.*, 220.29.

5) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 118.11-12.

7) *Çalyaparvan*, 44.4, 35, 38.

9) *Ibid.*, 201.15.

2) *Ibid.*, 60.49.

4) *Ibid.*, 114.55.

6) *Udyogaparvan*, 55.7.

8) *Çāntiparvan*, 15.17-18.

10) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 86.15.

to speak. Elsewhere, though, Vedic Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ seem to emerge to an individual position in their own right. Thus in one of the creation myths in the *Çāntiparvan*, it is described how Viṣṇu brought about the triple-world. After describing the creation of the four *varṇas*, it is recounted how Viṣṇu made Dhātṛ the lord and overseer of all beings.¹ And when Arjuna sets off to seek weapons from Indra and the gods, Draupadī says over him: 'Homage to Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ, go in safety and health.'² In the *Mokṣadharmā* it is mentioned: 'The Self-Created (God) at first created Dhātṛ, honoured in the worlds. Dhātṛ created an only son who was devoted to the maintaining of creatures.'³ And in the *Droṇaparvan*, when Duryodhana goes forth to battle Arjuna, Droṇa calls down upon him the good luck (*svastī*) of Brahmā, the twice-born, the seers, Lakṣmī, Arundhatī, the regents of the quarters, Kārtikeya, and Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ.⁴ Again, this would suggest a position of individual prominence for these gods derived from their abstract function as ordainers and maintainers.

In these instances, Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ are separate and personal gods, though to what extent (if at all) they were felt to be individual active gods with the power to help men it is not possible to say. However, often Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ are mere epithets of one of the great Gods, be it Çiva,⁵ Viṣṇu,⁶ Kṛṣṇa,⁷ or Brahmā.⁸ This occurs especially in the various *stotras* where the great God being praised is often identified in a pantheistic fashion with various aspects of the universe. In other contexts - though no formal identification is made - the terms Dhātṛ and Vidhātṛ may be epithets used of the great Gods in their capacity as ordainers of what must happen or be. Often, it would seem, the God Brahmā especially could just as readily be substituted.

1) Adhyakṣaṃ sarvabhūtānāṃ dhātāramakarotprabhuh// *Çāntiparvan*, 200.33.

2) Namo dhātṛe vidhātṛe ca svastī gaccha hyanāmayam/ *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 38.25.

3) Svayambhūrasrjaccāgre dhātāraṃ lokapūjitaṃ/

Dhātāsrjatatputramekaṃ prajānāṃ dhāraṇe ratam// *Çāntiparvan*, 282.10.

4) *Droṇaparvan*, 69.41-46.

5) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 15.31, 16.22, 17.47, 18.22, 145.39.

6) *Ibid.*, 135.18, 35.64, *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 187.6.

7) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 13.19, *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 62.32.

8) *Çāntiparvan*, 327.84, *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 106.41.

For instance, when Duryodhana took shelter beneath the waters of a lake at the end of the great battle, Yudhiṣṭhira admonishes him that the foremost duty created by the great-spirited Placer (*prathamo dharmāḥ sṛṣṭo dhātrā mahātmanā*) for *kṣatriyas* was bravery in battle.¹ And when Duryodhana was subsequently struck down in the battle of clubs with Bhīma, he laments that the condition of mortality had been ordained by the Placer (*dhātrā nirdiṣṭaḥ*).² In the *Çāntiparvan*, Arjuna explains to the grief-ridden Yudhiṣṭhira that punishment was ordained by the Placer to protect *dharma* and profit;³ while Vyāsa counsels Yudhiṣṭhira that he had been created by the Placer to perform action.⁴ Elsewhere, it is said that 'Formerly the Ordainer made ordinances relating to the totality of the world. The highest conduct of the virtuous was fixed in the cause of *dharma* which is subtle.'⁵ And when Indra bestows on the snake Sumukha the boon of a very long life, Garuḍa bitterly complains: 'The Placer, who is the Lord of all creatures, has, ever since the creation of all creatures, ordained my sustenance. Why should you prevent his purpose?'⁶

In these instances, Dhātr and Vidhātr (or most probably Brahmā) ordain or predetermine some rule or edict. However, in yet other contexts the terms Dhātr and Vidhātr seem to be used in a rather different fashion. For here they refer to an all-powerful personal 'force' that predetermines events from motives which are inscrutable, capricious, and arbitrary. Man is reduced to a powerless marionette with the course of events entirely predetermined by a power beyond his control. In this view, predestination is a theory about puppets and strings.

One example is the ancient history (*itihāsa purāṇa*) of a discourse between the great *asura* Namuci, who had lost all his prosperity, and the king of gods, Indra. The discourse begins with Indra curious as to whether the great *asura* grieved or not at

1) *Çalyaparvan*, 30.34.

2) *Ibid.*, 64.22.

3) *Daṇḍo vidhātrā vihito dharmārthābhīrakṣitum*// *Çāntiparvan*, 15.35.

4) *Yathā sṛṣṭo asi kaunteya dhātrā karmasu tatkuru*/ *ibid.*, 27.32.

5) *Lokasaṃgrahasamyuktaṃ vidhātrā vihitaṃ purā/ Sūkṣmadharmārthanīyataṃ satāṃ caritamuttamam*// *ibid.*, 251.25.

6) *Nisargātsarvabhūtānāṃ sarvabhūteṣvareṇa me/ Āhāro vihito dhātrā kimarthaṃ vāryate tvayā*// *Udyogaparvan*, 103.4.

his losses. Namuci first explains the futility of grief and sorrow, which were injurious to both body and mind.¹ Then the *asura* argues that grief and sorrow were in any case pointless, for man was not a free agent. Man was a powerless being moved by a will which was powerful and inscrutable:

There is one Ruler (only) - without a second - who directs men lying (even) in the womb. Like water down a slope, I move as I am directed by Him. ... What one is to attain that one certainly does attain. And that which is to happen, that indeed will happen. One must repeatedly dwell in whatever womb the Placer binds one. One does not choose oneself. ... Not by *mantras*, strength, power, intelligence, or manly effort can a mortal attain what is not to be attained. What is there for lamentation in this? Since before (my) birth the Placer had ordained what I will certainly experience. (Therefore) what can death do to me? One attains only what is to be attained. One goes only where one is to go. One attains only those sorrows and joys that one is to attain. That man who knows this in full is not deluded.²

King Yayāti, cast from heaven for the sin of pride, is another to reflect on the power of the Disposer, which is exercised through fate. And before this all-controlling power, man can only adopt an attitude of indifference and resignation:

In the world of the living the many and various creatures depend on fate (and) their striving and actions are fruitless. Whatever he attains the wise (man) should not be disturbed, (for) through his knowledge of the soul he deems fate the stronger. For a creature gains happiness or suffering dependent on fate, not through his own powers. Therefore, knowing fate is stronger he is never distressed and never rejoices. ... The wise (man) should ever remain indifferent. ... In danger, O Aṣṭaka, I am never bewildered; my mind is never distressed. As the Placer ordains for me in (this) world, that I know will surely be.³

1) Çāntiparvan, 219.1-5.

2) Ekah çāstā na dvitīyo asti çāstā

garbhe çayānaṃ puruṣaṃ çāsti çāstā/

Tenānuçişṭaḥ pravaṇādivodakaṃ

yathā niyukto aśmi tathā vahāmi// (8)

Yathā yathāśya prāptavyaṃ prāpnotyeva tathā tathā/

Bhavitavyaṃ yathā yacca bhavatyeva tathā tathā// (10)

Yatra yatraiva saṃyuñkte dhātā garbhaṃ punaḥ punaḥ/

Tatra tatraiva vasati na yatra svayamicchati// (11)

Na mantrabalavīryeṇa prajñayā pauruṣeṇa vā/

Alabhyaṃ labhate martyastatra kā paridevanā// (20)

Yadevamanujātasya dhātāro vidadhuḥ purā/

Tadevānubhaviṣyāmi kiṃ me mṛtyuḥ kariṣyati// (21)

Labdhavyānyeva labhate gantavyānyeva gacchati/

Prāptavyānyeva prāpnoti duḥkhāni ca sukhāni ca// (22)

Etadviditvā kārṣṇyena yo na muhyati mānavah/ ibid., 219.8,10-11,20-23.

3) Nānābhāvā bahavo jīvaloke

daivādhīnā naṣṭaceṣṭādhikārāḥ/

Tattatprāpya na vihanyeta dhīro

Therefore, according to Yayāti, one should be the same in fortune and misfortune for it is the Placer who decides through the force of fate.

The fullest, and most impassioned, discussion of the predetermining powers of the divine Placer occurs in an exchange between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira during the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile. As the grief-filled Pāṇḍavas sit around the fire in the evening, their beloved (*priyā*) Draupadī, in true wifely fashion, suddenly pours out her anguish and sorrow. Draupadī first recounts the cruel and evil behaviour of Duryodhana and his cohorts, and then recalls Yudhiṣṭhira's former glory and comforts as a mighty king, and compares this to his current lowly position. Then she points to the sufferings of his brothers; who, like Yudhiṣṭhira, did not deserve the discomforts of the forest.¹

Having worked herself up, Draupadī progresses from sorrowing for Yudhiṣṭhira's fallen status, to berating him for not doing anything about it; and for not showing the anger one would expect. Describing the miseries of his brothers and herself, she repeatedly challenges: 'Why doesn't your anger grow?' (*kasmānmanyurna vardhate*).² With signs of mounting frustration at Yudhiṣṭhira's imperturbability, Draupadī concludes with a repudiation of his right to be even called a warrior:

Surely there is no anger in you, O best of the Bhāratas, since, looking at your brothers and at me, your mind does not reel. There is no *kṣatriya* known in the world who is without anger, (and) who does not speak out. In you, a *kṣatriya*, I now see the opposite. A *kṣatriya* who does not display his authority when the (right) time comes, O Pārtha, all creatures despise him forever. Therefore by no means must you show forbearance towards your

 diṣṭaṃ baliya iti matvātmabuddhyā//
 Sukhaṃ hi janturyadi vāpi duḥkhaṃ
 daivādhīnaṃ vindati nātmaçaktyā/
 tasmāddiṣṭaṃ balavanmanyamāno
 na saṃjvarennāpi hr̥ṣyetkadācit//
 Duḥkhe na tapyenna sukhena hr̥ṣyet
 samena varteta sadaiva dhīraḥ/
 Diṣṭaṃ baliya iti manyamāno
 na saṃjvarennāpi hr̥ṣyetkadācit//
 Bhaye na muhyāmyaṣṭakāhaṃ kadācit
 saṃtāpo me mānaso nāsti kaçcit/
 Dhātā yathā mām vidadhāti loka
 dhruvaṃ tathāhaṃ bhaviteti matvā// Ādiparvan, 84.6-9.

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 28.1-18.

2) *kasmānmanyurna vardhate*, e.g. *ibid.*, 28.19-32.

enemies; for, without doubt, it is only through authority that they can be struck down.'

Yudhiṣṭhira counters Draupadī's emotion with a calm and considered homily on the evils of anger and the virtue of self-control. There was no end, explained Yudhiṣṭhira, to the evil an angry man could do. An angry man was capable of despising his betters, and even of slaying those who should be venerated. He would harm the innocent and honour the guilty. He was capable of saying and doing anything. As a result, the angry man would hurl himself into the abode of Yama and never attain prosperity. Only the man who controlled his anger would attain well-being. Perceiving these evils, the wise who desire the highest good (*paramaṃ śreyah*), conquer their wrath. Therefore, concluded Yudhiṣṭhira, his anger did not rise. 'How', he asked, 'can one like me let loose an anger which destroys the world.'²

And contrary to what Draupadī implied, it was only the self-controlled man who was capable of exercising real authority, not the angry man. It was only the ignorant who mistook anger for authority. Patience (*kṣamāvato*), truth (*satyam*), mildness (*anṛṣatsatā*) were the virtues Yudhiṣṭhira commended. If everyone offended or hurt were to strike back then all sense of social order would break down. Without patience there would be no peace in the world for anger was the root of war. 'In such (a world)', Yudhiṣṭhira cautioned, 'all these creatures would perish at once, O Draupadī. Anger, then, is for the destruction of creatures and for non-existence. The birth and existence of creatures goes on (only) because in this world (people) as patient as the earth are to be seen.'³ Yudhiṣṭhira hoped that under the urging of

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- 1) Nūnaṃ ca tava naivāsti manyurbharatasattama/
 Yatte bhrātṛiṅca māṃ caiva dr̥ṣṭvā na vyathate manah//
 Na nirmanyuḥ kṣatriyo asti loke nirvacanaṃ smṛtam/
 Tadadya tvayi paçyāmi kṣatriye viparītavat//
 Yo na darçayate tejaḥ kṣatriyaḥ kāla āgate/
 Sarvabhūtāni taṃ pārtha sadā paribhavantyuta//
 Tattvayā na kṣamā kāryā çatrūnprati kathamcana/
 Tejasaiva hi te çakyā nihantuṃ nātra saṃçayaḥ// *ibid.*, 28.33-36; also 29.33-35.
- 2) Tatkathaṃ mādr̥çāḥ krodhamutsṛjellokanāçanam// *ibid.*, 30.3; see 30.1-7.
- 3) Tāḥ kṣīyeranprajāḥ sarvāḥ kṣīpraṃ draupadī tādṛçe/
 Tasmānmanyurvīnāçāya prajānāmabhavāya ca//
 Yasmāttu loke dr̥çyante kṣamīṇaḥ pṛthivīsamāḥ/
 Tasmājjanma ca bhūtānāṃ bhavaçca pratipadyate// *ibid.*, 30.30-31.

the Kuru elders, Duryodhana would return their kingdom. Therefore, if he at least followed these virtues - of which Duryodhana was quite incapable - then the conflict and mutual destruction that threatened the Bhāratas in this terrible time could be averted. Whatever the case, Yudhiṣṭhira had full confidence that the virtues he abided by would receive their proper reward: 'Of those having patience, this is their world, and so also is the next. In this world they attain honour, and hereafter (they go) the good way. Those men whose anger is always conquered by (their) patience, they (attain) the higher worlds; therefore patience is considered supreme.'¹

Now Draupadī - with signs of mounting exasperation - will have none of this, and uses Yudhiṣṭhira's own example to ridicule his assumption about the rewards of patience, and gentleness, to be obtained through unfailing adherence to *dharma*. For if virtuous ends were obtained through these virtuous means, then Yudhiṣṭhira above all should have obtained a virtuous end. Yudhiṣṭhira had abided by and protected the *dharma* - but it had not protected him. Therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira's assumed connection between virtuous behaviour and virtuous rewards was not so, given what had befallen. The only excuse Draupadī could find for Yudhiṣṭhira's views was that his mind had been deluded by the Placer and the Ordainer.

Homage to the Placer and the Ordainer who have deluded you. While you should follow the way inherited from your father and grandfather, your mind has been drawn another way. If this unendurable calamity befell you, O Bhārata, which neither you nor your very powerful brothers deserved, then, in this world it is not through *dharma*, gentleness, patience or rectitude (that) a man obtains success, (and) never through compassion. ... I believe you would abandon Bhīmasena, Arjuna, the twin sons of Mādri, and myself - but not the *dharma*. I have heard from the noble ones (that) the *dharma*, if protected, protects a king who guards the *dharma*; but I think it does not protect you.²

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- 1) Kṣamāvatāmayaṃ lokāḥ paraṅcaiva kṣamāvatām/
Iha saṃmānamṛcchanti paratra ca ṣubhāṃ gatim//
Yeṣāṃ manyurmanuṣyāṇāṃ kṣamayā nihatāḥ sadā/
Teṣāṃ paratare lokāstasmātkṣāntiḥ parā matā// *ibid.*, 30.42-43.
- 2) Namo dhātre vidhātre ca yau moḥaṃ cakratustava/
Pitrpaitāmahe vṛtte voḍhavye te anyathā matiḥ//
Neha dharmānṛṇṣyābhyāṃ na kṣāntyā nārjavena ca/
Puruṣaḥ ṣriyamāpnoti na ghrṇitvena karhicit//
Tvāṃ cedvyasanamabhyāgādidaṃ bhārata duḥsaham/
Yattvaṃ nārhasi nāpīme bhrātaraste mahaujasah// *ibid.*, 31.1-3.
Bhīmasenārjunau caiva mādreyau ca mayā saha/
Tyajestvamiti me buddhirna tu dharmāṃ parityajeḥ//

Instead, though his whole life's behaviour had been given over to *dharma*, Yudhiṣṭhira had fallen into dire distress through one lapse to the evil of gambling, a lapse that left Draupadī mystified: 'You were honest, gentle, generous, modest and truthful - how could your judgement fall to the evil passion of gambling. My mind is utterly bewildered and consumed with grief, as I behold this suffering of yours, and such distress.'

Searching for an explanation for Yudhiṣṭhira's mysterious lapse, Draupadī calls upon an ancient tradition (*itihāsam purāṇanam*) according to which men are not free to choose their own course of action for all is predetermined by the Placer. And whatsmore, the Placer moves creatures in accord with his own capricious and malevolent will instead of some grand virtuous design. Creatures may seem to act, but this is mere delusion.

In this regard they relate an ancient tradition. Creatures stand in the power of the Lord, and have none themselves. It is the Placer alone who, as the Ruler, lays down everything for creatures - happiness and suffering, the agreeable and disagreeable - before (even) the seed comes forth. These creatures, O hero among men, (are) like wooden dolls (which he) puts together. (Then) he sets in motion (their) body and limbs. Pervading all creatures like ether, O Bhārata, the Lord ordains here what is good and evil. Like a bird tied to a string, (man) is restrained, and not the master; standing in the power of the Lord (he is) not the master of himself nor of others. Like a pearl strung on a thread, like a bull with a rope through the nose, (man) follows the command of the Placer; for (man) consists of Him (and) is moved by Him. At no time whatever is man independent. (He is) like a perished tree fallen from a bank into the middle of a stream. Knowing nothing, man has no control over his own happiness and suffering. Driven by the Lord, he may go to heaven or to hell. As grass-tops move to the power of a strong-wind, so do all creatures move to the power of the Placer, O Bhārata. Yoking himself to deeds noble or evil, the Lord pervades creatures (and) acts - (though) he is not perceived (as such). This body, known as the 'field', is nothing but the instrument of the Placer. Through it the Lord causes action to be performed, with good or bad results. Behold this magical power performed by the Lord - deluding them with his magical power, he kills creatures with (other) creatures. ... Thus, taking a disguise, the blessed Lord, the Self-Existent great Grandfather, breaks creatures with creatures, O Yudhiṣṭhira. Putting

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- Rājānaṃ dharmagoptāraṃ dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ/
 Iti me ṣrutamāryāṇāṃ tvāṃ tu manye na rakṣati// *ibid.*, 31.6-7.
 1) Rjormrdorvadānyasya hrīmataḥ satyavādinah/
 Kathamakṣavyasanaajā buddhirāpatitā tava//
 Atīva mohamāyāti manaṣca paridūyate/
 Niṣānya te duḥkhamidamimāṃ cāpadamīdṛṣīm// *ibid.*, 31.18-19.

them together and taking them apart, the blessed Lord, at his own inclination, plays with creatures, like a child with its toys.'

For Draupadī, the Placer was a wrathful, malevolent and vindictive puppet master worthy only of the contempt of the mortal marionettes he manipulated and abused:

O King, the Placer behaves towards creatures not like a father or a mother. Indeed, he acts from wrath, as do other people. Seeing the noble, the well-conducted and the modest distressed in their way of life, and the ignoble happy, I stagger at the mere thought of it. Beholding your adversity, and the prosperity at Suyodhanas, I condemn the Placer, O Pārtha, who can look upon (such) wickedness. What advantage does the Placer gain by giving prosperity to the Dhārtarāṣṭras, those cruel, greedy, transgressors against the noble scriptures and diminishers of the *dharma*. If a result does follow an act, it falls on the doer and no other; (then) surely the Lord is defiled by this evil act. But, if an evil act that is done does not fall on the doer, (then) in this world power alone is the cause; and I grieve for feeble mankind.²

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- 1) Atrāpyudāharantīmamitihāsaṃ purāṭanam/
 Īcvarasya vaṇe lokastiṣṭhate nātmano yathā//
 Dhātāiva khalu bhūtānāṃ sukhaduḥkhe priyāpriye/
 Dadhāti sarvamīcānaḥ purastācchukramuccaran//
 Yathā dārumayī yoṣā naravīra samāhitā/
 Īrayatyaṅgamaṅgāni tathā rājannimāḥ prajāḥ//
 Ākāṣa iva bhūtāni vyāpya sarvāni bhārata/
 Īcvaro vidadhātīha kalyāṇaṃ yacca pāpakam//
 Ākunistantubaddho vā niyato ayamāṇīcvaraḥ/
 Īcvarasya vaṇe tiṣṭhannānyeṣāṃ nātmanaḥ prabhuh//
 Maṇiḥ sūtra iva proto nasyota iva govṛṣaḥ/
 Dhāturādeṣamanveti tanmayo hi tadarpanaḥ//
 Nātmādhīno manuṣyo ayam kālaṃ bhavati kaṃcana/
 Srotaso madhyamāpannaḥ kṛlādvrkṣa iva cyutaḥ//
 Ajñō janturanīṣo ayamātmanaḥ sukhaduḥkhayoḥ/
 Īcvaraprerito gacchetsvargaṃ narakameva ca//
 Yathā vāyostṛṇāgrāni vaṇaṃ yānti balīyasah/
 Dhāturevaṃ vaṇaṃ yānti sarvabhūtāni bhārata//
 Āryakarmanī yuñjānaḥ pāpe vā punarīcvaraḥ/
 Vyāpya bhūtāni carate na cāyamiti lakṣyate//
 Hetumātramidaṃ dhātuh ṇarīraṃ kṣetrasaṃjñitam/
 Yena kārayate karma ṇubhāṇubhaphalaṃ vibhuh//
 Paṇya māyāprabhāvo ayamīcvaraṇa yathā kṛtaḥ/
 Yo hanti bhūtairbhūtāni mohayitvātmanāyayā// *ibid.*, 31.20-31.
 Evaṃ sa bhagavāndevaḥ svayaṃbhūḥ prapitāmahaḥ/
 Hīnasti bhūtairbhūtāni chadma kṛtvā yudhiṣṭhira//
 Saṃprayojya viyojyāyaṃ kāmākāraṇaḥ prabhuh/
 Kṛīḍate bhagavānbhūtairbhūlaḥ kṛīḍanakairiva// *ibid.*, 31.35-36.
- 2) Na mātrpitṛvadrājandhātā bhūteṣu vartate/
 Roṣādīva pravṛtto ayam yathāyamitaro janaḥ//
 Āryāñṇilavato drṣṭvā hrīmato vṛttikarṇitān/
 Anāryānsukhīnaṇṇaiva vihvalāmīva cintayā//
 Tavemāmāpadaṃ drṣṭvā saṃpṛddhiṃ ca suyodhane/
 Dhātāraṃ garhaye pārtha viṣamaṃ yo anupaṇyati//
 Āryaṇṇāstrātige krūre lubdhe dharmāpacāyini/
 Dhārtarāṇṇre ṇriyaṃ dattvā dhātā kiṃ phalamaṇute//
 Karma cetkṛtamanveti kartāraṃ nānyamaṇcchati/

Impassioned as Draupadī's views may be, it should be recalled that they are not themselves the result of a sudden burst of passion for they are based on an ancient tradition. As an answer to life's more blatant inequities, Draupadī's views were presumably well grounded.

Yudhiṣṭhira first compliments Draupadī on her speech, but then dismisses it as heresy (*nāstīkyaṃ*). And, indeed, from the orthodox point of view Draupadī's views on predestination were the grossest heresy for they repudiated the doctrine of karma, and more importantly they undermined all reason for adherence to *dharma*. It is this implication that most troubles Yudhiṣṭhira. Speaking for the orthodox tradition, Yudhiṣṭhira does not so much directly consider Draupadī's views on the doings of the Placer, as lay a stern emphasis on the importance of *dharma*. The *dharma*, he emphatically tells his errant wife, must be obeyed without question and without thought for any possible fruit or reward; for without obedience to this standard of behaviour, man would fall to the level of brute creation:

I act without seeking the fruit of the *dharma*, O daughter of a king! I give because I must give; I sacrifice because I must sacrifice. O Kṛṣṇā, to the best of my power, I do what is to be done by a man who dwells in a household, (whether) it is fruitful here or not. I observe *dharma*, O woman with beautiful hips, not because of the rewards of *dharma*, (but so as) not to violate the traditions, and to look towards the conduct of the virtuous. By its very nature, O Kṛṣṇā, my mind is fixed upon the *dharma* alone. He who desires to milk the *dharma* attains not the fruit of the *dharma*; and nor does the evil being who, from lack of belief, performs it in doubt. Do not seriously doubt the *dharma* out of excessive disputation or mere presumption; (for) a man who seriously doubts the *dharma* is destined to become an animal. The weak-souled who seriously doubt the *dharma* or the hymns of the seers, is excluded from the undecaying and immortal world, like a *çūdra* from the *Veda*. ... Therefore, O beautiful woman, with your mind confused by passion do not inveigh against or doubt the *dharma* and the Placer. He who doubts the *dharma* finds a standard in nothing else. Arrogant, he becomes the standard himself, despising his betters. ... For transgressing the standards, scorning the meaning of the *Vedas* and the Scriptures, following his desires and greed, the fool falls into hell. But he who, with mind made up, always resorts to the *dharma* alone, without questioning it, O beautiful woman, attains to infinitude in the next world.¹

Karmaṇā tena pāpena līpyate nūnamīçvarah//
 Atha karma kṛtaṃ pāpaṃ na cetkartāramçchatī/
 Kāraṇaṃ balameveha janāñçocāmi durbalān// *ibid.*, 31.37-42.

- 1) Nāhaṃ dharmaphalānveṣi rājaputri carāmyuta/
 Dadāmi deyamityeva yaje yaçtavyamityuta//
 Astu vātra phalaṃ mā vā kartavyaṃ puruṣeṇa yat/
 Gṛhānāvasatā kṛṣṇe yathāçakti karomi tat//
 Dharmāṃ carāmi suçroṇi na dharmaphalakāraṇāt/

However, Yudhiṣṭhira does at least concede that the 'fruit' of the *dharma* may at times seem obscure and mysterious - even to the gods - but he repudiates outright the notion that there is no connection between action and reward. It follows from what Yudhiṣṭhira says that human acts are meaningful. Man is not the powerless puppet of a capricious Placer for the Placer merely distributes rewards in accordance with the acts of men.

If the *dharma*, practised by the *dharma*-abiding, should be without fruit, this world would sink down into dark bottomless hell, O blameless woman: they would not attain emancipation; they would live the life of beasts; they would meet with obstacles only; and they would never achieve their purpose. If austerity, chastity, sacrifice, study of the *Vedas*, gift-giving and honesty should be fruitless, (then) the ancient ones, nor those before them, would not have practised *dharma*. It would be a deception without measure if acts were without fruit. For what reason should the seers, gods, *gandharvas*, *asuras* and *rākṣasas*, respected lords (all), observe the *dharma*? But knowing that the Placer gives the reward when good is certain, they observe the *dharma*, O Kṛṣṇā, for that is the eternal *dharma*. This *dharma* does bear fruit; *dharma* is never said to be fruitless. ... The appearance of the fruit of acts, (both) good and bad, their origin and disappearance, (these are) secrets of the gods, my angry wife! Nobody knows about these (fruits), (and) creatures are at a loss in this regard. The gods guard these fruits, for the divine magical power is mysterious. The twice-born, with their emaciated bodies, good vows, sins burned away through austerities, (and) minds calmed, perceive these (fruits). The *dharma* is not to be doubted, nor the deities, just because the fruit cannot be seen. ... 'Of acts there is fruit': this is the eternal rule (that) Brahmā declared to his son. ... Therefore, O Kṛṣṇā, let your doubt vanish like mist. ... Do not repudiate the Lord of Creatures, the Placer. Learn from him, bow to him, do not hold beliefs of this kind. O Kṛṣṇā! in no way must you blame the supreme deity through whose grace a devoted mortal becomes immortal.¹

Āgamānanatikramya satām vṛttamavekṣya ca/
 Dharma eva manah kṛṣṇe svabhāvāccaiva me dhṛtam//
 Na dharmaphalamāpnoti yo dharmam dogdhumicchatī/
 Yaścainam cañkate kṛtvā nāstikyātpāpacetanah//
 Ativādānmadāccaiva mā dharmamatiṇāñkithāh/
 Dharmātiṇāñkī puruṣastiryaggaṭiparāyaṇah//
 Dharmo yasyātiṇāñkyah syādārṣaṇ vā durbalātmanah/
 Vedācchūdra ivāpeyāṭsa lokādajarāmarāt// *ibid.*, 32.2-7.
 Ato nārhasi kalyāṇi dhātāraṇ dharmameva ca/
 Rajomūḍhena manasā kṣeptuṇ cañkitumeva ca//
 Dharmātiṇāñkī nānyasminpramāṇamadhigacchati/
 Ātmapramāṇa unnaddhaḥ cṛeyaso hyavamanyakah// *ibid.*, 32.14-15.
 Pramāṇānyativṛtto hi vedaḥāstrārthanindakah/
 Kāmalobhānugo mūḍho narakam pratipadyate//
 Yastu nityam kṛtamatirdharmamevābhīpadyate/
 Acañkamāṇah kalyāṇi so amutrānantyamaṇute// *ibid.*, 32.18-19.
 1) Aphalo yaḍi dharmah syāccarito dharmacāribhiḥ/
 Apratiṣṭhe tamasyetajjaganmajjedanindite//
 Nirvāṇam nādhigaccheyurjīveyuḥ paṇujīvikām/
 Vighātenaiva yujyeyurna cārtham kiñcidāpnuyuḥ//
 Tapaṣca brahmacaryaṇ ca yaññah svādhyāya eva ca/

In reply, Draupadī partly agrees with Yudhiṣṭhira to the extent that there are other factors involved in acts than just the Placer, and the Placer is now portrayed as acting in a more ordered and virtuous fashion towards his creatures. Draupadī first repudiates the idea that she was in any way condemning the *dharma* or the Placer: 'I do not in any way at all repudiate or censure the *dharma*, O Pārtha; indeed, why should I repudiate the Supreme God (who is) the Lord of Creatures. Know me, O Bhārata, in my grief I babble this; and I will lament still more, so hear me with a good heart.'" Draupadī first establishes - as does Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgīta* - that whatever moving creature is subject to birth must also be subject to action, especially humans. Draupadī then discusses the part destiny, chance, inherent nature, and human effort play in acts. She, at the least, rejects the view that destiny or chance are the sole causative forces in human acts, and now accepts that human acts, past and present, do yield a reward. At a stroke she thus demolishes the view that she had just so vehemently expounded. However, it is perhaps not entirely clear

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- Dānamārjavametāni yadi syuraphalāni vai//
 Nācarīṣyanpare dharmam pare paratare ca ye/
 Vipralambho ayamatyantam yadi syuraphalāḥ kriyāḥ//
 Rṣayaṣcaiva devāṣca gandharvāsurarākṣasāḥ/
 Īṣvarāḥ kasya hetoste Careyurdharmamādr̥tāḥ//
 Phaladam tviha vijñāya dhātāram ḥreyasi dhruve/
 Dharmam te hyācarankṛṣṇe taddhi dharma sanātanam//
 Sa cāyam saphalo dharmo na dharmo aphala ucyate/ *ibid.*, 32.23-29.
 Karmaṇāmuta puṇyānām pāpānām ca phalodayaḥ/
 Prabhavaṣcāpyayaṣcaiva devaguhyāni bhāmini//
 Naitāni veda yaḥ kaṣcinmuhyantyatra prajā imāḥ/
 Rakṣyānyetāni devānām gūḍhamāyā hi devatāḥ//
 Kṛṣṇāṅgāḥ suvratāṣcaiva tapasā dagdhakilbiṣāḥ/
 Prasannairmānasairyuktāḥ paṇyantyetāni vai dvijāḥ//
 Na phalādarṣanāddharmāḥ ṣaṅkitavyo na devatāḥ/ *ibid.*, 32.33-36.
 Karmaṇām phalamastīti tathaitaddharma ṣaṣvatam/
 Brahmā provāca putrāṇām ...
 Tasmātte saṁṣayaḥ kṛṣṇe nīhāra iva naṣyatu/ *ibid.*, 32.37-38.
 Īṣvaram cāpi bhūtānām dhātāram mā vicikṣipaḥ/
 Ḍikṣasvainam namasvainam mā te bhūdbuddhirīdr̥ṣī//
 Yasya prasāddāttadbhakto martyo gaṇchatyamartyatām/
 Uttamam daivatam kṛṣṇe mātivocaḥ kathamcana// *ibid.*, 32.39-40.
 1) Nāvamanye na garhe ca dharmam pārtha kathamcana/
 Īṣvaram kuta evāhamavamaṇsyē prajāpatim//
 Ārtāham pralapāmīdamiti mām viddhi bhārata/
 Bhūyaṣca vilapiṣyāmi sumanāstannibodha me// *ibid.*, 33.1-2.

whether Draupadī is now arguing that chance, destiny, inherent nature and human acts all play their own independent part in what happens; or whether what an individual seems to obtain from fate and chance is really the result of previous acts alone. Her immediate views would suggest the latter; but the views of the wise that she cites would suggest the former.

He who (believes) destiny is supreme in the world and he who speaks of chance, they are both outcastes; it is belief in (human) action that is praised. For he who waits upon destiny (and) sleeps happily without acting, (that) very foolish pleasure-lover will sink down like a pot in water. Likewise, he who believes in chance (and) does not act though able to act, (that) foolish one will not be seated long (and) will live like one unprotected. (If) any man unexpectedly achieves a purpose, (and) they think it by chance (alone), (then) surely his efforts are not (recognised). And if a man acquires something (and) calls it destiny (then), O Pārtha, it is deemed to be destiny caused by divine ordinance. (But) when a man, by his own acts, acquires a certain reward that is to be seen clearly with the eyes, it is declared as that man's (doing). Another (man), who acts from (his) inherent nature, may attain purposes without (apparent) cause - know, O best of men, (that) that fruit belongs to (his) inherent nature. So, what a man obtains from chance, from destiny, from inherent nature, and from (his own) action, that is the fruit of previous deeds.¹

Then Draupadī explains that it is the Placer who mediates between the *karman* or act and the *phala* or fruit: he assigns man's lot according to his *karman*.

The Lord Placer himself - for whatever reason - determines one's acts, distributing here the fruit of the previous acts of men. When a man does anything, good or bad, then know that it was determined by the Placer, arising from the fruit of previous acts. In every action, this body is the instrument of that Placer; (and) as he drives man on, so man acts, powerlessly. For, the

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- 1) Yaçca diṣṭaparo loke yaçcāyaṃ haṭhavādakaḥ/
 Ubhāvapasadāvetau karmabuddhiḥ praçasyate//
 Yo hi diṣṭamupāsīno nirviceṣṭaḥ sukhaṃ svapet/
 Avasīdetsudurbuddhirāmo ghaṭa ivāmbhasi//
 Tathaiva haṭhabuddhiryaḥ çaktaḥ karmanyakarmakṛt/
 Āsīta na ciraṃ jīvedanātha iva durbalaḥ//
 Akasmādapī yaḥ kaçcidarthaṃ prāpnoti pūruṣaḥ/
 Taṃ haṭheneti manyante sa hi yatno na kasyacit//
 Yaccāpi kiṃcitpuruṣo diṣṭaṃ nāma labhatyuta/
 Daivena vidhinā pārtha taddaivamiti niçcitam//
 Yatsvayaṃ karmaṇā kiṃcitphalamāpnoti pūruṣaḥ/
 Pratyakṣaṃ cakṣuṣā drṣṭaṃ tatpauruṣamiti smṛtam//
 Svabhāvataḥ pravṛtto anyāḥ prāpnotyarthānakāraṇāt/
 Tatsvabhāvātmakaṃ viddhī phalaṃ puruṣasattama//
 Evaṃ haṭhācca daivācca svabhāvātkarmaṇastathā/
 Yāni prāpnoti puruṣastatphalaṃ pūrvakarmaṇaḥ// *ibid.*, 33.11-18.

great Lord, the assigner in this or that activity, makes all creatures act, O Kaunteya, even unwillingly.¹

In Draupadī's revised view man is still controlled and moved by the Placer, but importantly the Placer now exercises his control according to previous deeds. So man is really the victim of his own past deeds - an important point for the orthodox - rather than the capricious whims of the Placer. The latter view, of course, would provide no sound foundation for obedience to *dharma*.

Draupadī then proceeds to recite the views of the wise on this very problem; even though these may not be entirely consistent with what she had already said. These views, she explained, had first been expounded by Bṛhaspati, the priest of the gods; though she had heard them from her father who had been taught by a learned brahmin:

Some say everything is due to chance, some say everything is due to destiny, (and) some say everything arises from human exertion - this is explained as the triple (answer). And others think (that) conduct is not (explained) by these (answers) alone. ... (For) some is from destiny, some from chance, and some from one's own action, (and thus) does a man obtain the fruit; there is no fourth cause here. Experienced men, who truly know, affirm (this). Even so, the Placer (still) bestows the fruit on creatures, whether desired or not. If he should not, there would never be misery for creatures; (for) a man would perform the (necessary) act for whatever purpose was desired. (And) if (an act) was not done before, would it bear-fruit?²

As we shall see in chapter four, the idea that fate/destiny, chance and human effort

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- 1) Dhātāpi hi svakarmaiva taistairhetubhirīṣvaraḥ/
Vidadhāti vibhajyeha phalaṃ pūrvakṛtaṃ nṛṇāṃ//
Yaddhyayaṃ puruṣaḥ kiṃciturkurute vai ṣubhāṣubham/
Taddhātṛvhiṭaṃ viddhi pūrvakarmaphalodayaṃ//
Kāraṇaṃ tasya deho ayaṃ dhātuḥ karmaṇi karmaṇi/
Sa yathā prerayatyenaṃ tathāyaṃ kurute avaṣaḥ//
Teṣu teṣu hi kṛtyeṣu viniyoktā maheṣvaraḥ/
Sarvabhūtāni kaunteya kārayatyavaṣānyapi// *ibid.*, 33.19-22.
- 2) Sarvameva haṭhenaike diṣṭhenaike vadantyuta/
Puruṣaprayatnajaṃ kecittraidhametanirucyate//
Na caivaitāvataḥ kāryaṃ manyanta iti cāpare/
Asti sarvamaṇḍalyaṃ tu diṣṭaṃ caiva tathā haṭhaḥ/
Dr̥ṣyate hi haṭhāccaiva diṣṭāccārthasya saṃtatiḥ//
Kiṃciddaivāddhātūḥ kiṃciturkurute svakarmataḥ/
Puruṣaḥ phalaṃ nāpnoti caturthaṃ nātra kāraṇaṃ/
Kuṣalāḥ pratijānanti ye tattvaviduṣo janāḥ//
Tathaiva dhātā bhūtānāmiṣṭāniṣṭaphalapradaḥ/
Yadi na syānna bhūtānāṃ kṛpāṇo nāma kaṣcana//
Yaṃ yamarthamabhiprepsuḥ kurute karma pūruṣaḥ/
Tattatsaphalameva syādyadi na syātpurākṛtaṃ// *ibid.*, 33.30-34.

all play a part in human action is a common 'compromise' answer to the problem of fate and freedom in the orthodox tradition. While compromise solutions have their virtues, it is often at the cost of tolerating obscurities. In this instance, it is not particularly clear what the connection is between the Placer and fate as a cause - more especially as the Placer also distributes the fruit of acts.

Finally - and probably to Yudhiṣṭhira's incredulity - Draupadī brings her argument full circle. Draupadī, it will be recalled, began by assailing her husband for doing nothing, only to then argue that man was in any case powerless before the power of the Placer. Having again accepted that human effort did play a part in the outcome of an action, Draupadī resumes her assault on Yudhiṣṭhira for doing nothing. Draupadī now cites Manu's dictum that 'The act must be done' (*kartavyam tveva karmeti*) for the man who does not try perishes completely: 'For the most part, O Yudhiṣṭhira, the man who acts achieves complete success in this world; but the indolent man nowhere finds (success).'¹ In support of these views, she calls upon a climatic analogy, which must at least partly suggest the origin of Indian views on fate:

Having cleaved the earth with his plough, the peasant scatters the seed; then he sits silently (and) the rain is the cause (of growth). If the rain does not favour him, then the peasant is without fault: 'I have done everything that the other man did.'²

Therefore, concluded Draupadī, success was not the most important thing, for as not all factors were under the individual's control success could never be guaranteed. The important thing was to at least try. Failure to act, not failure, was alone blameworthy. However, Yudhiṣṭhira's recipe of gentleness, patience and virtue was still not for Draupadī. One should look for the weak spot in enemies, and work for

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- 1) Kurvato hi bhavatyeva prāyeneha yudhiṣṭhira/
Ekāntaphalasiddhiṃ tu na vindatyalasah kvacit// *ibid.*, 33.37.
2) Pṛthivīm lāṅgalenaiva bhittvā bījaṃ vapatyuta/
Āste atha karṣakastūṣṇīm parjanyastatra kāraṇam//
Vṛṣṭiḥcennānugrhnīyādanenāstatra karṣakah/
Yadanyaḥ puruṣaḥ kuryātkṛtaṃ tatsakalaṃ mayā// *ibid.*, 33.44-45.

their downfall and destruction.'

So, ultimately Draupadī agrees with Yudhiṣṭhira that the acts of human beings are meaningful and do yield results. But she seems to disagree with Yudhiṣṭhira's more truly karmic view that man is wholly in charge of his own destiny. For Draupadī, there are other factors such as fate, and chance, beyond the influence of human action, that also decide the outcome of an act. Draupadī's final views obviously owe much to the common sense view based on the observation of a peasant and his crop. It could be suggested that, despite their grey areas, Draupadī's views about fate, chance and the Placer would have had the wider appeal.

The internal evidence, too, would suggest that the Placer is only a thinly disguised epithet for the doings of Brahmā. Draupadī, for instance, refers to the Placer as the 'self-existent' and as the 'great Grandfather', two of the most common epithets of Brahmā, especially the latter. Yudhiṣṭhira, too, refers to the Placer as the 'Lord of Creatures', another common epithet of Brahmā; and cites Brahmā by name as teaching the eternal rule that of acts there is always fruit.

There remain to be considered various other more brief references to the doings of the Placer. Generally the Placer would again seem to be an epithet for the perceived doings of one or other of the great Gods. For the most part they portray the Placer as exercising a thorough-going degree of control over the lives of mortals.

Interestingly, in some of these references Yudhiṣṭhira offers a view of the Placer which is much closer to that argued by Draupadī. Thus during an interlude in Bhīṣma's monumental teachings in the *Āntīparvan*, the Pāṇḍavas and Vidura discuss the relative importance of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. Of the speakers, Vidura upholds *dharma*, Arjuna extolls *artha*, Nakula and Sahadeva advocate a combination of *artha* and *dharma*, while appropriately Bhīma praises *kāma*. Yudhiṣṭhira, however, speaks up for some of the principal ideals to be found in the *Bhagavadgītā*. He commends the

1) *Ibid.*, 33.46-53.

ideal of selfless action, or the performance of tasks with an attitude of indifference and sameness, as a way of freeing oneself from happiness and suffering, and as a way of attaining the ultimate goal of 'liberation' (*mokṣam*) and the 'higher *nirvāṇa*' (*nirvāṇaparāḥ*). One should, therefore, regard gold and a clod of earth as the same. Indeed, the self-born blessed Lord (*svayambhūrbhagavān*) had declared that there was no liberation for those bound by attachment. However, if attachment is to be overcome, the responsibility would seem to lie more with the Creator (*vidhi*) than with the individual. As Yudhiṣṭhira explains it: 'This (view) is the best. There is no acting out of one's own free-will. As I am constrained so do I act. The Creator directs all creatures. All of you must know (that) the Creator is all-powerful. No one, by his deeds, (ever) obtains an unobtainable object. Know that everything that is to be does take place.' Yudhiṣṭhira's reference to the self-born blessed Lord would suggest that the Creator is really *Brahmā*. After Duryodhana had been struck down in the battle of clubs with *Bhīma*, Yudhiṣṭhira is again impressed by the controlling power of the Placer. Yudhiṣṭhira approached his fallen foe, and with tears in his eyes said: 'Assuredly this was ordained by the great-spirited powerful Placer; that we should wish to afflict you, and you us, O foremost of the Kurus.'²

King *Dhṛtarāṣṭra*, as we shall see, was another with strong views on the determining power of the Placer in the life of mortal men. For instance, when *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* contemplates in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* the slaughter of the well-supplied and well-prepared Kaurava army, he reflects: 'As formerly the Placer ordained, that (must be) so, and not otherwise.'³ Duryodhana was another to feel that he was being

1) *Etatpradhānam na tu kāmakāro*
yathā niyukto asmi tathā carāmi/
Bhūtāni sarvāṇi vidhirniyuṅkte
vidhirbalīyāniti vitta sarve//

Na karmanāpnotyanavāpyamarthaṃ
yadbhāvi sarvaṃ bhavati vitta/ *Çāntiparvan*, 161.45-46.

Compare, too, Yudhiṣṭhira's views on the Placer at the time of the gaming. See below pp.366-70.

2) *Nūnametadbalaavatā dhātrādiṣṭaṃ mahātmanā/*

Yadvayaṃ tvāṃ jighāṃsāmastvaṃ cāsmānkurusattama// *Çalyaparvan*, 58.19.

3) *Purā dhātrā yathā sṛṣṭaṃ tattathā na tadanyathā//* *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 72.26. Also see below pp.358-66.

directed by some indeterminate personalised external power that was beyond his control. Half way through the traumatic game of dice the wise Vidura made one last attempt to warn King Dhṛtarāṣṭra against his son. Duryodhana promptly attacked Vidura for treasonous partiality, and for always giving advice which was not sought. But tellingly Duryodhana - like Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛtarāṣṭra before him - revealed that he felt events were not within his control: 'There is one Ruler (only); there is no second Ruler. (And this) Ruler rules a man lying (even) in the womb. Therefore, like water flowing down, directed (by this Ruler) I flow as I am impelled.'

However, in other examples the Placer may express not so much the deeds of a great God as the notion of truly impersonal, inscrutable and immovable fate. Just as so many other impersonal abstractions and concepts have been personalised in the Epic,² then so has impersonal fate in these instances been given a thin veneer of personalisation as the Placer. This is especially so in those instances where the Placer is portrayed as exercising his will through the instrument of Time.

Thus in the *Ādiparvan*, when King Dhṛtarāṣṭra is decimated at the loss of all his sons, Saṃjaya consoles him with the view that it was all the doing of the Ordainer working through Time:

It was destined to be so; you must not grieve over it. (Even) with the foremost wisdom, who can avert fate. No one escapes the path ordained by the Ordainer. Life and death, happiness and unhappiness - all this is rooted in Time. Time ripens beings; Time destroys creatures. Time again brings to an end the Time that burns down creatures. Time develops all beings in the world, pure and impure. Time destroys all creatures (and) again sends them forth.

1) Ekah ṣāstā na dvitīyo asti ṣāstā

garbhe ṣayānaṃ puruṣaṃ ṣāsti ṣāstā/

Tenānuṣiṣṭaḥ pravaṇādivāmbho

yathā niyukto asmi tathā vahāmi// Sabhāparvan, 57.8.

2) For instance, the god Dharma is described as having three worthy sons:

Tranquillity (ṣamaḥ), Love (kāmaḥ), and Joy (harṣaḥ) who support the world with their energy (tejasā lokadhāriṇaḥ). In turn, Love's wife was Pleasure (ratir), Tranquillity's wife was Attainment (prāptir), and Joy's wife was Delight (nandī) and upon them the worlds are founded. (Ādiparvan, 60.31-32) In the descriptions of the Divine Halls, the personalised forms of a surprising array of concepts, principles and natural features attend upon the gods. See Sabhāparvan, 7-11. In the Ṣāntiparvan even Punishment (daṇḍaḥ) is quite graphically personalised. See Ṣāntiparvan, 121.

Unchecked, impartial, Time moves amongst all beings.¹

In the *Āntiparvan*, the sage Vyāsa similarly explains to the sorrowing Yudhiṣṭhira that man's lot comes not from his own actions, but from the decree of the Ordainer who bestows all through the instrument of Time:

Nothing is attained through action or thought; nobody gives to (another) man. The Ordainer ordains through the revolution (of Time). Man attains all through Time. If the Time is not right, men as a species are not able to attain (their purpose) through intelligence or study of the scriptures. Sometimes even a fool obtains wealth, for through Time it is achieved without distinction.²

The great *asura* Bali is another to draw consolation from the view that Time is the instrument in which the Placer - or the Ruler (*ṣāstr*) as he is here called - exercises complete sway over the course of events in the triple-world. Fresh from defeating the *asuras*, Indra searches the earth for Bali, the king of the *asuras*. Eventually he finds him reborn as an ass, living on chaff. Gloatingly, Indra reminds Bali of his former glory and splendour, and asks whether the *asura* did not now grieve. Bali responds that there was no point to grief, for all, including his present lowly rebirth, was transient; and even more, all was predetermined and beyond the control of the individual. Therefore he remained indifferent in the face of the dualities of existence - success and defeat, life and death, and so on:

Regarding this as transitory, due to the changing of Time, I do not therefore grieve, O Ṣakra. For all this truly has an end. ... I neither hate nor desire success and misfortune, life and death, and also the fruit of pleasure and pain. ... The very learned and the little learned, the strong and the weak, the beautiful and the ugly, the fortunate and the unfortunate, Time -

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- 1) Bhavitavyaṃ tathā tacca nātaḥ ḡocitumarhasi/
 Daivaṃ prajāñāviṣeṣeṇa ko nivartitumarhati//
 Vidhātrvihitaṃ mārgaṃ na kaḡcidativartate/
 Kālamūlamidaṃ sarvaṃ bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe//
 Kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni kālaḥ saṃharati prajāḥ/
 Nirdahantaṃ prajāḥ kālaṃ kālaḥ ḡamayate punaḥ//
 Kālo vikurute bhāvānsarvāñlloke ḡubhāḡubhān/
 Kālaḥ saṃkṣipate sarvāḥ prajā visṛjate punaḥ/
 Kālaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu caratyavidhṛtaḥ samaḥ// Ādiparvan, 1.186-189.
- 2) Na karmaṇā labhyate cintayā vā
 nāpyasya dātā puruṣasya kaḡcit/
 Paryāyayogādvihitaṃ vidhātrā
 kālena sarvaṃ labhate manuṣyaḥ//
 Na buddhiḡāstrādhyayanena ḡakyaṃ
 prāptuṃ viṣeṣairmanujairakāle/
 Mūrkhō api prāpnoti kadācidarthā-
 nkālo hi kāryaṃ prati nirviṣeṣaḥ// Āntiparvan, 26.5-6.

unfathomable in its strength - seizes them all. Knowing that I am under the dominion of Time, why should I be disquieted? One only burns afterwards what is burnt (already); one only slays afterwards the (already) slain; one who is destroyed has been destroyed already; a man attains (only) what is to be attained (for him). ... If I beheld Time not destroying creatures, (then) I would be (subject to) joy, pride, and anger, O husband of Çacī. ... Time gives everything (and) Time takes everything away. All things are arranged by Time. O Çakra, do not brag of your manly energy. ... Origin and strength never depend on oneself. ... My mind is settled here: I will continue under the dominion of the Ruler.¹

To conclude, there are probably more gods in the Hindu pantheon than can be counted, but by no means are they all of the same importance. From the point of view of fate and freedom, it is only the three great Gods, who are before and beyond the triple-world, that really matter. The remaining gods are little more than super-human spirits; though, as we shall see, they are not even always more powerful than humans. As we have seen, in a variety of ways the great Gods predetermine much of what will happen in mortal affairs. Though occasionally the text suggests that the great Gods do this in accordance with the actions of men, this is little more than a weak attempt to save the doctrine of karma. For normally in the *Mahābhārata* the great Gods direct and influence human affairs in accordance with their own purposes and ends, most especially the preservation of *dharma* and order. The triple-

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- 1) Anityamupalakṣyedaṃ kālapyāyamātmanah/
 Tasmācchakra na çocāmi sarvaṃ hyevedamantavat// (5)
 Arthasiddhimanarthaṃ ca jīvitam maraṇam tathā/
 Sukhaduḥkhaḥphalaṃ caiva na dveṣmi na ca kāmaya// (13)
 Mahāvidyo alpavidyaḥca balavāṇdurbalaḥca yaḥ/
 Darṇāṇīyo virūpaḥca subhago durbhagaḥca yaḥ//
 Sarvaṃ kālāḥ samādatte gambhīraḥ svena tejasā/
 Tasmīnkālavaḥcaṃ prāpte kāmā vyathā me vijānataḥ//
 Dagdhamevānudahati hatamevānuhanti ca/
 Naçyate naçtamevāgre labdhavyaṃ labhate naraḥ// (18-20)
 Yadi me paçyataḥ kālō bhūtāni na vināçayet/
 Syānme harṣaḥca darpaḥca krodhaḥcaiva çacīpate// (22)
 Kālāḥ sarvaṃ samādatte kālāḥ sarvaṃ prayacchati/
 Kālēna vidhṛtaṃ sarvaṃ mā krthāḥ çakra pauraṣam// (25)
 Prabhavaḥca prabhāvaḥca nātmasaṃsthaḥ kadācana// (27)
 Evaṃ me niçcitā buddhiḥ çāstustiṣṭhāmyahaṃ vaçe// (31) *ibid.*, 217.5-31.

world is a particularly fragile creation, and if some sense of order is to be maintained, the constant intervention of the great Gods is required to predetermine the broad outline of events. And to this extent, for ordinary mortals the will of the gods may seem little different to the doings of fate.

However, it is important to emphasise that, outside of the theological lauds and praises, the great Gods predetermine only some events, not all events; and so the idea of human freedom is limited but not destroyed. It would seem that it never occurred to the authors of our text that just because some events are predetermined by the gods, all freedom of action is denied to men. For the most part, these ancient authors do not seem to have viewed the problem only in the black and white terms of predestination or free-will. But the qualification is important for in certain contexts man's lot is perceived as entirely predetermined, but interestingly the agent of predestination is invariably not a great God directly but the Dhātṛ or Vidhātṛ; and this is especially so where the Placer or Ordainer is identified with Time and assumes characteristics more reminiscent of impersonal fate.

Chapter 3: Fate

From the material considered so far it is apparent that in the *Mahābhārata* predestinarian views are strongly and widely held. However, there still remains much material to be considered in which we find the basic idea that the actions of men are controlled from the beyond. This material, though, cannot be tidily labelled predestinarian for, to the extent that the agency of control is considered at all, there is no indication that it is personal. With certain reservations we may term this material fatalistic, though more in the popular sense of fate than in the philosophical.

The main reason for reservation is that the line between predestination and fate is in practice not always clear. This is reflected in the terminology itself. The origins of *daiva*, perhaps the most commonly used term for fate in the *Mahābhārata*, are seemingly predestinarian for literally the term means 'divine, celestial, belonging to or coming from the gods'. And, as we have seen, *daiva* is frequently used to render predestinarian views. The terms *diṣṭa*, *vidhi*, and *vihita*, with the essential sense of directed, ordained, and designated are also seemingly of predestinarian origins. As the arrangement of gods in pre-Epic times was confused and fluid, perhaps terms such as *daiva*, *diṣṭa*, and so on, came to express the general concept of personal divine power, as well as the will of a particular god. Therefore, as the importance of the Vedic gods waned, it became easier for these terms to express a more impersonal idea of fate. After all, *diṣṭa*, *vidhi* and *vihita* invite the question ordained by what just as readily as ordained by whom. *Kāla*, or Time, is also very frequently used in the sense of impersonal destiny or fate, and though no doubt impersonal in origin it too is commonly personalised or appears as the instrument for expressing the will of a great God. The terms *bhāgadheya*, 'given share or portion', and *bhavitavya* 'what must be', alone seem to have a more impersonal origin and to be used in a more consistently impersonal sense.'

1) It is interesting to note that despite the undoubted importance of astrology in the Hindu tradition (see, for instance, P. Thomas, Secrets of Sorcery, Spells

The principal difference between predestinarian and fatalistic ideas in the *Mahābhārata* seems to be more one of emphasis than terminology. In the predestinarian material the emphasis is as much, or even more, on God's controlling power as it is on man's subordination. In the fatalistic material, the outstanding fact is that human life is controlled and fixed, and the controlling forces are mostly thought of as vague, mysterious, and impersonal, or simply remain unmentioned.

It is perhaps because of the lack of clear definition or contrast between predestinarian and fatalistic ideas that the two views seem to have existed side by side quite comfortably. At first it might be thought that impersonal notions of fate would recede before the growing strength of predestinarian views, which were consequent on the emergence to full view for the first time in the *Mahābhārata* of the new gods Īṣa and Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa,¹ but this does not seem to have been the case.

It is no easy task to systematically classify the innumerable statements concerning fate in the *Mahābhārata*. At first the most fruitful approach would seem to be to consider the different terms used to express ideas of fate, destiny, lot etc., in their impersonal sense.² However, as these terms are often used interchangeably without any discernible difference of meaning, this method has serious limitations. For instance, as Yudhiṣṭhira mused after Draupadī had been rescued from the love-crazed King Jayadratha: 'I consider Time to be all-powerful,

Pleasure Cults of India, pp.164-171) it receives little real consideration in the *Mahābhārata*. There are, admittedly, various references to indicate that significant events and undertakings were held at auspicious astrological conjunctions (e.g. Ādiparvan, 8.13, 114.4, 124.9, 133.30, 190.5, Sabhāparvan, 1.17, 2.13, 23.4, Āraṇyakaparvan, 54.1, 91.25, 261.15, 275.65), as well as a few stray references to astrologers (e.g. Sabhāparvan, 5.31, Udyogaparvan, 47.92), and not infrequent portents amongst the heavenly bodies heralding some momentous (and usually catastrophic) happening (e.g. Sabhāparvan, 71.26). However, there do not seem to be any occasions in the Epic in which the stars are cited as actually pre-ordaining the actions of men. This is in notable contrast to the Persian Epics. (see H. Ringgren, Fatalism in Persian Epics, pp.49-79.)

1) See T.J. Hopkins, op.cit., pp.87-89.

2) This is the approach used in Ringgren, Fatalism in Persian Epics, op.cit., p.6.

and fate which is fashioned by (divine) ordinance, and the destiny of beings of which there is no transgressing." Therefore, the approach adopted here is to consider the range of circumstances in which fate is called upon as an explanation.

Very broadly, it can be said that fate is generally called upon to explain the more extreme and inexplicable changes of circumstance within the triple-world. As the central story-line of the *Mahābhārata* concerns a family division which develops into a cataclysmic mutual destruction, it is only to be expected that perhaps the bulk of these extreme and inexplicable changes ultimately concern destruction death and catastrophe. As well, fate and Time may be called upon to explain violent swings of fortune and circumstance (and especially monstrous misfortune), and to account for seemingly incomprehensible or totally unpredictable behaviour or happenings.

When the going got difficult, it would seem, the workings of fate and Time often appear to have offered a more comfortable and palatable explanation for the redactors of the *Mahābhārata* than God's will or the past misdeeds of man (karma). In the minds of men, of course, there is a readily comprehensible connection between fate on the one hand, and the grosser fortunes of life, more especially death and destruction. For mortals, the fragility of life and the inescapable certainty of death constitute the greatest of all evils. The grim inevitability of man's mortal lot can readily give rise to feelings that each individual is driven to destruction and death by some inexorable force or fate quite beyond control. And just as death is inevitable, so is birth and life, or at least a certain share of life. What, then, could be more natural than the belief that the force or fate that brings such a universal and significant event as death should also bring birth and an allotted share of life, and should hold sway over the destiny or quality of that life?²

The connection between Time, death, and the ups and downs of life is if anything

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- 1) Manye kālaṣṭa balavāndaivaṃ ca vidhinirmitam/
 Bhavitavyaṃ ca bhūtānāṃ yasya nāsti vyatikramah// Āraṇyakaparvan, 257.4.
 Also see Čāntiparvan, 28.16-32 where *vidhāna*, *kāla*, *bhavitavya* and *diṣṇa* are all used without any discernible difference.
- 2) cf. Dietrich, *op.cit.*, pp.59-90.

even more understandable or comprehensible. Though for mortal man the nature of Time is very difficult to comprehend,¹ its implications are only too apparent. Time equals ceaseless change, and change means not just uncertain fluctuations in personal fortune, but ultimately decay, destruction and death. As S.G.F. Brandon explains it:

Time is experienced as change: the phenomena, presented to us through our senses, alter, and the alteration may affect us in various ways, to our good or our ill. The logic of this experience gradually teaches each person that his situation is never secure; that it is ever subject to change. He finds this knowledge disturbing, and especially since it tends to affect him more in terms of its menace of ill than its promise of good. Instinctively he craves for the continuance of that which he knows, fearing from his memory of the past that the future is more likely to bring sorrow than joy. This sense of insecurity is basic to human nature and its effect is profound. It prevents us, except for the briefest moment, from immersing ourselves completely in enjoyment of present experience; it causes us also ever to be anticipating future contingencies. Indeed, the more rational we endeavour to be in the conduct of our affairs, the more likely we are to be sensitive to the menace of the future. ... But Time bears an even greater threat to the individual person than that of causing change in his environmental conditions: it teaches him that he is mortal. ... Awareness of Time, accordingly, involves awareness of mortality. This means that Time not only threatens man with vicissitudes of fortune in his social or economic situation, thereby causing him to seek, as we have seen, to render himself secure from such change as may be adverse. It also menaces him with the very disintegration of himself - a menace, too, that he knows will certainly be fulfilled, whether its event comes soon or late. Consequently, his sense of Time fills him with a profound foreboding of ill to his very self, and it stirs within him the instinct to escape, to find some abiding security from a destiny so sure and so dreadful.²

Given the depths of man's feelings regarding Time it is readily comprehensible how Time can come to be looked upon as not just a neutral measurer of the flow of events, but also as an active force that brings to pass events that could not otherwise have been. In other words, Time does not just reveal the course of events, but instead actively determines them, especially the significant events such as birth, marriage, death, and the unpredictable fortunes of life. This attitude towards Time is particularly common in the *Mahābhārata* where Time is often portrayed as an

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- 1) Compare St Augustine of Hippo's comment on the enigma of Time: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not. ...' Confessions, xi, 17, cited in Brandon, *op.cit.*, p.6.
 - 2) *Ibid.*, pp.9-11. Also compare, H. Ringgren, 'the Problem of Fatalism' in Ringgren (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.12-13.

active power that urges, impels, prompts, drives on, deludes and so on.¹

In the *Mahābhārata*, then, events are developed and explained as much in terms of impersonal fate and Time as in terms of God's will and karma. This is particularly so in the central plot of the *Mahābhārata*, which we shall consider first.

At one of the *Mahābhārata*'s various beginnings in the *Ādīparvan*, King Janamejaya asks its supposed author, the seer Vyāsa, to relate to him the origins of the division that arose amongst all his grandfathers whose 'minds were overpowered by fate' (*daivenābhīpracoditaḥ*).² However, it is Vyāsa's student Vaiṣampāyana who recounts the *Mahābhārata* to King Janamejaya; and in his opening comments he explains that 18 armies assembled on the field of Kurukṣetra and there went to their destruction 'through the supernatural action of Time, which made the Kauravas its instrument.'³ From the very outset of the *Mahābhārata*, the implication is there that the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas were driven on to their fratricidal slaughter by the directing power of fate and Time.

Fate and Time also play their part in explaining the complicated riddle that the question of the Bhārata succession became. Thus in the *Ādīparvan* it is described how King Ṣaṃtanu's rightful heir, Bhīṣma had vowed never to succeed to the throne or beget children so as to allow his father to marry Satyawatī, the fragrant smelling daughter of the king of the fisherfolk. They had two sons, Citrāṅgada and Vicitravīrya, but neither managed to produce a male heir. With the Bhārata lineage threatened by extinction, Queen Satyawatī arranged that Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana - an earlier son begotten by a great seer - should beget sons on Vicitravīrya's widows Ambikā and Ambālikā. However, when Kṛṣṇa entered Ambikā's bedroom the lamps were still burning and the sight and smell of the great seer were such that she could

1) Indeed, Time first appears in *Atharvaveda* xix,53 as akin to Destiny; and *kāla* is later identified with Yama, the god and judge of the dead, and as an associate of Mṛtyu or Death. See J. Jolly, 'Fate (Hindu)', in Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol.5, p.790a.

2) *Ādīparvan*, 54.20.

3) Kauravāṅkāraṇaṃ kṛtvā kālenādbhutakarmaṇā// *Ādīparvan*, 2.25.

not look at him for sheer fright. Now when the anxious Satyavatī asked if there would be a son, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, 'impelled by fate' (*vidhinā sampracoditah*), replied that there would be a wise and mighty king with one hundred sons, but because of his mother's defect he would be born blind. The son, of course, was Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Now when Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana came to Ambālikā's bedroom, she paled at his frightful ugliness, and consequently she gave birth to a son called Pāṇḍu, the pale one.¹

The younger brother, at least, could see, and so he became the king. However, fate again played a part to make a complicated succession even more complicated. For one day King Pāṇḍu proceeded to the hunt, and seeing a buck deer mating with its doe, he shot it with his arrow. But the buck was an ascetic who chose to consort with his wife in the form of a deer. After condemning the king for committing a cruelty which not even lovers of evil would commit, the seer then attributed his terrible deed to the doing of fate which had deluded the king's mind: 'Wisdom does not swallow fate; but fate does swallow wisdom. (A man's) wisdom does not attain to purposes which are in the power of fate.'² Nevertheless, while fate received the blame, Pāṇḍu still received the terrible curse: death when he too was in the act of conjugal love.³

Thereupon Pāṇḍu, after placing his blind half-brother on the throne, retired to the forest to pursue an ascetic existence in the forest with his two wives. Now, by the power of his *tapas*, Pāṇḍu soon won the road to Heaven; but he found that he could not take this road for of the four debts with which men are born - sacrifice for the gods, study and austerities for the seers, benevolence for men, sons and *grāddhas* for the ancestors - he had yet to acquit himself of the last. However, with their divine eye, the accompanying ascetics confirmed that there were offspring for Pāṇḍu, and advised: 'Bring about here with action what is ordained by fate, O tiger

1) *Ibid.*, 94-100.

2) Na vidhiṃ grasate prajñā prajñāṃ tu grasate vidhiḥ/
Vidhiparyāgatānarthānaprajñā na pratipadyate// *ibid.*, 109.10.

3) *Ibid.*, 109.1-31.

amongst men.' With the boon Kuntī had received of begetting a son by whatever god she summoned, the decree of fate was quickly fulfilled, with the production of five heroic sons.

But Pāṇḍu's contentment at becoming a father of sorts was to be short-lived for Time and lust were to bring to fruition the seer's curse and drive the king to his destruction. For once in the fertile season of spring, at the time when creatures are stupefied (*bhūtasammohane*), the king wandered through the wood with his wife Mādrī. And as he gazed at Mādrī in her single piece of pretty clothing, desire grew in him like a fire in a thicket. Then 'the mind of this lusting (king) was deluded by Time itself',² and so he forcibly lay with his struggling wife and immediately succumbed to the Law of Time (*kāladharmaṇā*).³

With Pāṇḍu's early death, the question of the rightful succession was left in considerable confusion. As the oldest of the Bhārata princes and the oldest son of the former king, Yudhiṣṭhira had the soundest claim, even though his father had been only the second son. And Yudhiṣṭhira's claim would have been unchallengeable save for the turn of Time and fate that led his father to an early death. However, as the oldest son of the senior branch of the Bhārata line, Duryodhana too could reasonably feel he had a sound claim; and Duryodhana's claim also would have been unchallengeable except for the turn of fate that had left his father blind.

In the short term, at least, the problem was avoided or deferred for the young princes were still subject to the Kuru elders. Their youthful energies were absorbed by putting them under the tutelage of Droṇa who, though a brahmin, knew the whole science of weaponry. Indeed, Droṇa taught weaponry to all the young princes from the surrounding kingdoms, including Dhṛṣṭadyumna who had been especially begotten by King Drupada for Droṇa's destruction so as to avenge an old feud. Droṇa knew this full well, but he still took Dhṛṣṭadyumna on 'for the great-minded Droṇa deemed

1) *Daivadiṣṭaṃ naravyāghra karmaṇehopapādaya/ ibid.*, 111.19.

2) *Tasya kāmātmano buddhiḥ sākṣātkālena mohitā/ ibid.*, 116.11.

3) *Ibid.*, 116.1-12.

inescapable fate to be inevitable, (and) so he acted thus to safeguard his own fame.' Droṇa, then, justified his seemingly suicidal behaviour in terms of inexorable fate, and the need to uphold duty above all.

But there is friction aplenty, and even aborted efforts at assassination. However, relates the narrator Vaiṣampāyana, these early attempts by the Kauravas to kill their cousins were unsuccessful for the Pāṇḍavas were 'protected by the purpose of fate and destiny' (*daivabhāvyartharakṣitān*).² Presumably fate here acts in accordance with moral considerations, protecting the virtuous and hindering the wicked. When the princes do come of age, Duryodhana and King Dhṛtarāṣṭra connive to have the Pāṇḍavas exiled to distant Vārāṇasī, allowing them the opportunity of securing full control of the kingdom for their lineage. Duryodhana, though, was prepared to go rather further for, with evil in his heart, he despatched his minister Purocana on ahead to have constructed for the Pāṇḍavas a house of highly combustible material. After time had passed, Yudhiṣṭhira,³ the King of Dharma, suggested that to save themselves and fool their enemies, they should put six people in the house in their place and set fire to it before escaping unobserved. In this scheme the forces of fate conspired in their aid. For one night their mother Kuntī held a large feast in honour of the brahmins at which people ate, drank and made merry. And 'prompted by Time' (*kālacoditā*),⁴ a Niṣāda woman with her five sons came there too, and they became drunk with wine till they lost consciousness. After the other guests had left, Bhīma set fire to the house and the Niṣādas were burnt to death.⁵ In this case, it is Time that drives the Niṣādas on to their destruction, though preserving the Pāṇḍavas at the same time. Indeed, if the fisherfolk Niṣādas are considered as too lowly to rate in the scale of humanity (and this is how they seem to have been considered), it could be concluded that by preserving the Pāṇḍavas

1) Amokṣaniyaṃ daivaṃ hi bhāvi matvā mahāmatih/
Tathā tatkr̥tavāndroṇa ātmakīrtyanurakṣaṇāt// *ibid.*, 155.52.

2) *Ibid.*, 55.15.

3) Of all people!

4) Ādiparvan, 136.7.

5) See *ibid.*, 136.1-19.

against their enemies Time here reveals a moral dimension instead of just acting as blind fate.

With the Pāṇḍavas' marriage to Draupadī, and consequent alliance with the powerful Pāṇcālas, the news quickly spread that they and Kuntī lived. The news hardly cheered Duryodhana and his brothers as they returned unsuccessful from Draupadī's *svayamvara*. All their efforts to thwart and destroy their rivals had come to nought, a fact that led Duḥṣāsa to bemoan: 'But fate, I think, is all-powerful, (and) manly effort futile. Fie on our manly effort, O Brother, if the Pāṇḍavas survive here.'

Worried by this alignment of forces, the Kauravas earnestly debated what should be done. Of the speakers Karṇa soon emerged as the foremost advocate of war. Discounting Duryodhana's suggestions of trickery and corrupting the Pāṇḍavas with vices, Karṇa urged that as the stronger party they should resort to battle at once and defeat their enemies.² However, Bhīṣma and Droṇa opposed any suggestion of war arguing that the Pāṇḍavas should be conciliated with all due honour, and given half the kingdom.³ And Vidura, the strongest advocate of peace, urged: 'O King, who, cursed by fate, would undertake with war a purpose that can be brought about by mere conciliation.'⁴ To King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Karṇa derided their advice as being partial, but more significantly he dismissed the importance of all these wordy counsels, for it was the workings of fate that mattered, not the advice of counsellors: 'In difficult matters friends are neither for better nor for worse; for all is in accordance with fate, whether it is happiness or suffering.'⁵ To illustrate his point, Karṇa cited the story of King Ambūvīca of Rājagṛha. Now that king was devoid of all action, capable of no more than mere breathing. In all his affairs he relied on his

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- 1) Daivaṃ tu paramaṃ manye pauruṣaṃ tu nirarthakam/
Dhigasmātpauruṣaṃ tāta yaddharantīha pāṇḍavāḥ// *ibid.*, 192.12.
2) See *ibid.*, 194.1-21. 3) *ibid.*, 195.1-19, 196.1-12.
4) Yacca sāmnaiva çakyeta kāryaṃ sādhayitum nṛpa/
Ko daivaçaptastatkartum vighraheṇa samāçaret// *ibid.*, 197.26.
5) Na mitrāṇyarthakṛcchreṣu çreyase vetarāya vā/
Vidhipūrvam hi sarvasya duḥkham vā yadī vā sukham// *ibid.*, 196.15.

minister Mahākarni who became the sole master and began to despise the king. Yet, despite all his striving he could not take the kingdom away. Therefore, Karṇa concluded:

His sovereignty assuredly was fated, what else (could it be)? If your kingdom has been fated, O lord of people, then before the eyes of all the world, it will surely stay with you. And if fated otherwise, (even) striving you will not obtain it.¹

In this instance, fate seems to be a general power that determines all acts, and brings happiness and suffering to mortals at its own behest.

On this occasion, at least, Dhṛtarāṣṭra does choose to listen to the advice of the Kuru elders. The kingdom is divided and the Pāṇḍavas are allotted the Khāṇḍava Forest area. Under Yudhiṣṭhira's wise and benevolent rule, the kingdom prospers mightily; and after having a divine hall built without parallel on earth, Yudhiṣṭhira contemplates celebrating the sacrifice appropriate for a Universal Sovereign. In this aspiration Yudhiṣṭhira is encouraged by Arjuna and Bhīmasena, and Kṛṣṇa too is favourable, but advises that Yudhiṣṭhira must first destroy the mighty ruler of Magadha, King Jarāsaṃdha, who not only rivalled Yudhiṣṭhira for the title, but also constituted a prime enemy of Kṛṣṇa's people, the Vṛṣṇis. Kṛṣṇa then recounts the most unusual birth of this king, highlighting the part played by fate. As the result of a boon from the seer Gautama Kakṣīvat, the two wives of King Bṛhadratha became with child. However, when the time came they each gave birth to a child with half a body only, though albeit alive. The mothers, beset by misery, abandoned the two halves which were soon found by a flesh-eating *rakṣasī* called Jarā. But 'impelled by the power of fate' (*vidhānabalacoditā*)² she joined the two pieces together whereupon they instantly became one. Hearing the baby cry the king and his two wives rushed out to redeem the child which was called Jarāsaṃdha ('put together by Jarā').³

Through the combination of Kṛṣṇa's cunning and Bhīma's brute and savage

1) Kimanyadvihitānnūnaṃ tasya sã puruṣendratā/
 Yadi te vihitam rājyaṃ bhaviṣyati viçāṃ pate//
 Miçataḥ sarvalokasya sthāsyate tvayi taddhruvam/
 Ato anyathā cedvihitam yatamāno na lapsyase// *ibid.*, 196.23-24.
 2) Sabhāparvan, 16.39. 3) See *ibid.*, 16.11-51.

strength King Jarāsaṃdha is disposed of, and the way is prepared for Yudhiṣṭhira to celebrate the great sacrifice which all the kings, including the Kauravas, duly attend. Now, after witnessing the enormous opulence and splendour of Yudhiṣṭhira's Royal Consecration, Duryodhana and Çakuni remained alone in Yudhiṣṭhira's divine hall. And as they wandered there the divine wonders proved far the better of poor Duryodhana. The king's various misadventures included falling into a pond of crystalline water which he mistook for land; and crashing head first into a door which he thought was open. Even worse was the fact that Bhīma, Arjuna, the twins, Draupadī and the women laughed at his misfortune. An intolerant man (*amarṣaṇaḥ*) he did not forgive their derision (*avahāsam*). So Duryodhana journeyed home burning over the fortune of the Pāṇḍavas (*pāṇḍavaçrīprataptasya*) and distressed in thought (*dhyānaglānasya gacchataḥ*). Observing his mood, Çakuni asked what was wrong, whereupon Duryodhana launched into a tirade expressing his resentment at the immense prosperity and evident ascendancy of the other family line:

Seeing such blazing prosperity at the Pāṇḍavas, I have fallen under the sway of anger, (and) unaccustomed (as I am), I am burning. I shall enter fire, or (take) poison, or I shall enter water; for I shall not be able to live. For who in this world who is called a man (and) possessed of courage will patiently endure seeing his rivals thrive and himself diminish. ... All alone I am not capable of obtaining the fortune of King (Yudhiṣṭhira). And I see no allies, therefore I think of death. Seeing such a splendid fortune brought to the sons of Kuntī, I deem fate alone to be supreme, (and) manly effort to be futile. O Saubala, in the past I have made attempts to destroy him; (but) then overcoming (them) all, he grew like a lotus in water. Therefore I deem fate supreme, (and) manly effort futile; for the Dhārtarāṣṭras decline (and) the Pārthas always thrive.'

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- 1) Çriyaṃ tathāvidhāṃ dr̥ṣṭvā jvalantīmiva pāṇḍave/
 Amarṣavaçamāpanno dahye ahamatathocitaḥ//
 Vahnimeva pravekṣyāmi bhakṣayiṣyāmi vā viṣam/
 Apo vāpi pravekṣyāmi na hi çakṣyāmi jīvitum//
 Ko hi nāma pumāñlloke marṣayiṣyati sattvavān/
 Sapatnānr̥dhyato dr̥ṣṭvā hānimātmana eva ca// *ibid.*, 43.26-28.
 Açaktaçcaika evāhaṃ tāmāhartuṃ nr̥paçriyam/
 Sahāyāñça na paçyāmi tena mṛtyuṃ vicintaye//
 Daivameva paraṃ manye pauruṣaṃ tu nirarthakam/
 Dr̥ṣṭvā kuntīsute çubhrāṃ çriyaṃ tāmāhṛtāṃ tathā//
 Kṛto yatno mayā pūrvam vināçe tasya saubala/
 Tacca sarvamatikramya sa vṛddho apsviva pañkajam//
 Tena daivam paraṃ manye pauruṣaṃ tu nirarthakam/
 Dhārtarāṣṭrā hi hiyante pārthā vardhanti nityaçaḥ// *ibid.*, 43.31-34.

Thus, Duryodhana's reaction, when faced with the perceived futility of human effort and the power of fate, was to contemplate death. For Duryodhana, events were well beyond control, and the only reasonable explanation was the power of fate.

However, Çakuni's interpretation of events was less dramatic, for he attributed the Pāṇḍavas' prosperity and various escapes not to the power of fate, but to the good luck (*bhāgadheyāni*) they had always enjoyed (*bhuñjate sadā*).¹ With this view, Çakuni was more inclined to action; and suggested that the way to defeat Yudhiṣṭhira was not through battle, but through the dice.²

The major difficulty with this scheme was to convince King Dhṛtarāṣṭra to permit it, and King Yudhiṣṭhira to participate in it. As we shall see in chapter four, with reluctance and resignation both agree, freely citing the Placer and fate as leaving them no choice.³ And as the Kaurava elders watched the disastrous family division unfold before their eyes, there were feelings that such a monstrous misfortune could only be the doing of fate. One of the more dramatic moments of the dicing was when Duryodhana taunted Bhīma by exposing his left thigh - the thigh upon which the wife sat - to Draupadī. In his rage, Bhīma vowed to break that thigh in battle with his club, and as he did so flames of fire came forth from all the orifices of his body (*srotobhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāvakārciṣaḥ*). And as the wise Vidura observed this terrible scene, he gravely intoned: 'Assuredly this is the fate set in motion in former times; the deepest misfortune has arisen amongst the Bhāratas.'⁴ And as the Pāṇḍavas donned ascetic

1) *Ibid.*, 44.1.

2) *Sabhāparvan*, 44.1-22.

3) See below pp.358-66.

4) *Daiverito nūnamayaṃ purastāt
paro anayo bharateṣūdapādī*// *ibid.*, 63.16.

garb and readied themselves for their forest exile, their mother Kuntī, lamenting much, piteously blamed the misfortunes of her sons on fate. After reflecting on the virtues of her sons, she asked: 'Why should misfortune befall you; why this contrary fate?'

After the Pāṇḍavas had departed for the forest amidst terrible portents, Duryodhana and his ilk were left to contemplate what their wilful behaviour had led to. Almost immediately Duryodhana, Karṇa and Çakuni made their way to seek the protection in any future conflict of the warrior brahmin Droṇa. Though Arjuna was his special favourite, Droṇa, as duty required, extended his protection to those who sought it, even though he accepted that the Pāṇḍavas could not be slain and that the course of events would be decreed by fate:

The twice-born have said that the Pāṇḍavas, who are sons of gods, cannot be killed. But I shall do what I am able to do for those who obtain (my) protection. I cannot forsake the Dhārtarāṣṭras and their king who have come (to me) with their devotion and all their soul - (but) the outcome I think is rooted in fate.²

However, in standing by his duty to the Dhārtarāṣṭras, Droṇa was also putting his own actions in line with the course of fate. For Droṇa went on to forecast his own death at the hands of the son of King Drupada, who had been begotten for this very purpose.³

During the gambling match, fate often seemed to be acting in an inscrutable and capricious fashion. But shortly after the beginning of the Pāṇḍavas' exile,

1) Vyasanam vaḥ samabhyāgātko ayam vidhiviparyayaḥ/ *ibid.*, 70.14.

2) Avadhyānpāṇḍavānāhurdevaputrāndvijātayaḥ/
Ahaṃ tu çaraṇam prāptānvartamāno yathābalaṃ//
Gatānsarvātmanā bhaktyā dhārtarāṣṭrānsarājakān/
Notsahe samabhityaktuṃ daivamūlamataḥ param// *ibid.*, 71.34-35.

3) *ibid.*, 71.41-42.

fate is portrayed as having a more moral dimension. After visiting the Pāṇḍavas in their forest exile, the mighty seer Maitreya made his way to Hastināpura where he preached to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana the necessity of peace. When Duryodhana, in an insolent fashion, ignored this advice, the great seer, 'incited by fate' (*vidhinā samprayuktas*)¹ cursed the recalcitrant king. Maitreya pronounced that unless there was peace, Bhīma would break Duryodhana's thighs with his club in a great battle.² In this instance, at least, the effect of fate is to support the virtuous and punish the wicked.

During their twelve years of forest exile, little of truly dramatic moment occurs to the Pāṇḍavas, and perhaps as a consequence, fate plays a quite limited part in the voluminous account of their forest years. One of the few such occasions occurs when Draupadī is abducted by the love-crazed King Jayadratha. After her rescue, Yudhiṣṭhira mused on the unpredictable workings of fate and Time that seemed devoid of rhyme or reason:

I consider Time to be all-powerful, and fate which is fashioned by ordinance, and the destiny of beings of which there is no transgressing. For how could such a happening befall our *dharma*-knowing and *dharma*-observing wife like an untrue charge of theft upon an honest man. For not a sin whatsoever had she done, or a blameworthy deed anywhere.³

But, curiously, the principal occasion when fate is mentioned comes from the mouth of Bhīmasena who more normally only ever spoke of action and the strength of his own arms. During their twelfth year in the forest, Bhīma, who on other occasions decimated forests with the violence of his movements, wandered alone in a beautiful wood on the shores of Lake Dvaita. There he was observed and

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 11.31.

2) *Ibid.*, 11.27-36.

3) Manye kālāṣṭra balavāndaivaṃ ca vidhinirmītam/
 Bhavitavyaṃ ca bhūtānāṃ yasya nāsti vyatikramaḥ//
 Kathaṃ hi patnīmasmākaṃ dharmajñāṃ dharmacārīṇīm/
 Saṃspr̥ṣṭvādr̥ṣṭvā bhāvaḥ śuciṃ stānyamivāṇṛtam//
 Na hi pāpaṃ kṛtaṃ kiṃcitkarma vā ninditaṃ kvacit/ *ibid.*, 257.4-6.

seized by an immense and starving snake which deprived him of all his strength. To describe the full horror the sight of this snake induced, the text compares it to the fear wrought on creatures by Time and Death: 'terrifying to all creatures, like Time, the Ender and Yama'.¹ The serpent soon revealed himself as King Nahuṣa, an ancestor of the Pāṇḍavas, and explained that he had fallen to this state through a curse imprecated by the sage Agastya for despising brahmins. 'Behold', the snake exclaimed, 'this fate of mine' (*paçya daivamidaṃ mama*).² And although, as a relation, Bhīma was not to be eaten, Nahuṣa explained that fate disposed in strange ways: 'I shall eat you now: behold this form of fate.'³ Bhīma, too, who esteemed his strength above all else, could only explain his inexplicable predicament as due to the power of fate:

I am not angry with you, O great snake, nor do I blame myself. ... Who is able to avert fate with human effort. I think fate alone is supreme; human purpose is futile. For behold me now, overpowered by fate, I have here incurred this state without cause, though I rely on the strength of my arms.⁴

But fortunately Yudhiṣṭhira relied on his brains and saved his mighty brother.⁵

It is also Bhīma who cites the irresistible power of Time to Yudhiṣṭhira as the reason why they should repudiate their agreement to thirteen years exile, and get on with the destruction of the Kauravas. Time - here almost personalised as the Winged Finisher or Death - waited for no one, therefore they should not wait on Time:

Having made a compact with Time, the Winged Finisher, which is endless and immeasurable, a torrent carrying off all, you - a mortal bound by Time with the characteristics of foam and fruit - think Time is present before

1) Trāṣanaṃ sarvabhūtānāṃ kālāntakayamopamam/ *ibid.*, 175.15.

2) *Ibid.*, 176.14.

3) Ahamadyopayokṣyāmi vidhānaṃ paçya yādṛçam// *ibid.*, 176.15.

4) Na te kupye mahāsarpa na cātmānaṃ vigarhaye// (25)

Daivaṃ puruṣakāreṇa ko nivaritumarhati/

Daivameva paraṃ manye puruṣārtho nirarthakaha// (27)

Paçya daivopaghātāddhī bhujaṣvīryavyapāçrayam/

Imānavasthāṃ saṃprāptamanimittamihādyā māṃ// (28) *ibid.*, 176.25-28.

In fact, Bhīma lost his strength as a result of a boon the snake had received.

Ibid., 175.17-21..

5) See *ibid.*, 175-78.

arrows he is like Time, the Ender and Yama'.¹ And after Arjuna's great battle with the Nivātakavacas, Arjuna describes the demons as savage fighters in the shape of Time (*yudhā raudrāḥ kālarūpāḥ*).² The terrible *rākṣasa* Kirmīra, 'equal to Time (itself)' (*kālakalpo vyadr̥ṣyata*), also makes a brief appearance before the Pāṇḍavas.³ Bhīma, however, despatched him in fairly perfunctory fashion.

It is not until the *Udyogaparvan* that references to fate and Time again become more frequent. By this time the Pāṇḍavas had completed their thirteen years of exile and negotiations had begun for the return of their kingdom. Much depended on the negotiations for the price of failure was assured destruction. As the acrimony, tension, and prospect of conflict rose, considerations of fate seem to have come more readily to the minds of the principal actors. Thus when Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer Saṁjaya journeyed to the Pāṇḍava court as an envoy on behalf of the Kauravas, Kṛṣṇa forthrightly approved the rightness of the Pāṇḍava cause, and made clear his own lack of conviction about negotiations. Death and destruction, through the power of fate, was what he expected. As Kṛṣṇa proclaimed: 'When, performing their ancestral duty, they fall to their death through the power of fate, fulfilling their own duty as far as possible, then their very death will be praised.'⁴ Yudhiṣṭhira, though, remained almost desperately hopeful that some peaceful solution could be found. To Saṁjaya, Yudhiṣṭhira denied any warlike intentions, and, citing an extreme case, felt that even one cursed by fate would not so choose: 'Why would a man ever knowingly wage war? Who, cursed by fate, would choose war?'⁵

1) *Ṣarātisarge ṣighratvātkālāntakayamopamaḥ*// *ibid.*, 28.23.

2) *ibid.*, 167.5.

3) *ibid.*, 12.20.

4) *Te cetpitrye karmaṇi vartamānā*

āpadyerandiṣṭavaṇena mṛtyum/

Yathāṣaktyā pūrayantaḥ evakarma

tadapyeṣāṁ nidhanaṁ syātpṛaṣaṣtam// *Udyogaparvan*, 29.18.

5) *Kuto yuddham jātu naraḥ pṛajānan*

ko daivaṣapto abhivṛṇīta yuddham/ *ibid.*,

The principal difficulty in the negotiations was the intransigence of Duryodhana and his supporters. From the very beginning Duryodhana had declared his position: he would not return so much land as could be covered by the point of a needle. It was a position from which he was not to budge despite the appeals of his father King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, his mother Queen Gāndhārī, various Kuru elders, and Kṛṣṇa's own special form of diplomacy. Consequently, as his attempts at persuasion came to nothing and war seemed more and more likely, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra could only explain a situation which was well beyond his control as due to the destructive power of Time: 'These foolish Kurus have fallen under the power of Time, and are perishing.' Reflecting later on how Duryodhana had refused to accept Kṛṣṇa's wise counsel, Dhṛtarāṣṭra concluded that he was being pulled along by Time (*kṛṣṭaḥ kālena*).² And when Duryodhana, hissing like a great snake (*mahānāga iva ṣaśan*) strode out of the court with his followers after clashing with Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma stated: 'I think this entire *kṣatriya* class is cooked by Time, O Janārdana, for all the princes along with their councillors follow out of folly.'³ Bhīṣma, too, could only explain some of the extraordinary optimism of the war party in terms of the deluding powers of Time. When Karna bragged that he with his best troops would slay the Pāṇḍavas with their allies, Bhīṣma snapped that his mind had been seized by Time (*kālaparītabuddhe*).⁴

By the time of his own mission to Hastināpura, in an attempt to restore peace, Kṛṣṇa described the Dhṛtarāṣṭras as 'having been cooked by Time' (*kālapakvā*). And Arjuna reassured Draupadī that if Duryodhana heeded not Kṛṣṇa's

1) Ete naçyanti kuravo mandāḥ kālavaçaṃ gatāḥ// *ibid.*, 50.59; also 56.27.

2) Droṇaparvan, 61.25.

3) Kālapakvamidaṃ manye sarvakṣatraṃ janārdana/
Sarve hyanuṣṭā mohātpārthivāḥ saha mantribhiḥ// Udyogaparvan, 126.31.

4) *Ibid.*, 61.7.

advice, then he would succumb to the power of fate (*diṣṭasya vaṣameṣyati*).¹ As expected, Duryodhana paid no attention to the word of God incarnate, and ultimately walked out ordering his followers to march to the field of Kurukṣetra. The kings, Kṛṣṇa related on his return, made Bhīṣma commander and departed with their troops 'exultant and urged on by Time' (*samhr̥ṣṭāḥ kālacoditāḥ*).² Kṛṣṇa now decisively concluded that the Kauravas, under Duryodhana's sway, were 'cooked by Time' (*kālāpakvam*);³ 'impelled by Time' the Kauravas had disregarded his words.⁴

And Kuntī, too, who more than anyone was aware of the full tragedy of the impending family conflict, could only cite fate after she had failed to talk Karṇa into taking his position as her eldest son and fighting for the Pāṇḍavas. Embracing him and shuddering with sorrow, she lamented: 'So it must be then, the Kauravas will go to their destruction. As you have said, O Karṇa, fate is all-powerful.'⁵ After the end of the battle, Kuntī explained to Yudhiṣṭhira, grief stricken at the destruction of their eldest brother, that she and Sūrya had formerly tried to pacify Karṇa and induce him to join his brothers; but 'seized by Time' (*kālāparitāḥ*) he was determined on enmity and division.⁶ For Kuntī, the anguished mother, fate seems to be all-powerful, inexorable and inscrutable.

However, King Çalya, uncle of the Pāṇḍavas, held a more optimistic view of fate, assuring Yudhiṣṭhira that 'All this suffering, O hero, will end in happiness. Do not vent your anger over it (for) fate is stronger here.'⁷ In this instance, at least, Çalya sees a moral element to the working of fate; though given that Çalya

1) *Ibid.*, 81.4.

2) *Ibid.*, 148.4.

3) *Ibid.*, 129.3.

4) Na kurvanti vaco mahyaṃ kuravaḥ kālacoditāḥ/ Çalyaparvan, 34.9.

5) Evaṃ vai bhāvyametena kṣayaṃ yāsyanti kauravāḥ/
Yathā tvaṃ bhāṣase karṇa daivaṃ tu balavattaram// Udyogaparvan, 144.24.

6) Çāntiparvan, 6.5-8.

7) Sarvaṃ duḥkhamidaṃ vīra sukhodarkaṃ bhaviṣyati/
Nātra manyustvayā kāryo vidhīriha balavattaraḥ// Udyogaparvan, 8.35.

had just informed the Pāṇḍavas he would fight for Duryodhana, Yudhiṣṭhira must have wondered.

The final say on the effect of fate and Time in bringing about this great tragedy is left to Kṛṣṇa's older brother Balarāma. As he addressed the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa with war imminent, he said: 'There shall be an extremely violent (and) terrible destruction of men. Assuredly this is fated I think (and) cannot be averted. ... The warrior class of the earth has assembled, undoubtedly cooked by Time, (and) there will be a very great destruction, mixed in flesh and blood.'

The most frequent references to fate and Time occur without a doubt in the battle books (the *Bhīṣma*, *Droṇa*, *Karṇa* and *Çalyaparvans*); and this again suggests that it is within the context of death, destruction and catastrophe that the effects of fate and Time are most readily seen at work. Throughout the *Mahābhārata* much literary effort is put into the production of appropriate comparatives and superlatives to highlight and embellish the course of events. In contexts involving human battle and destruction, the most frequent comparisons are to the destructive powers of Time, as well as to the Ender or Death, and Yama. Not unoften these terms are linked together, the context making it clear that they are considered interchangeable. Time, especially, is seen as a simile for death and destruction.

While such comparisons, as we have seen, are occasionally made in the earlier *parvans*, they become extremely frequent throughout the battle books. Thus Arjuna careers in battle like Time (*vyacaratkālavadrane*),² and his feats are so awesome he is said to resemble Time, Yama and the Ender (*kālāntakayamopamam*),³ and to be

1) Bhavitāyaṃ mahāraudro dāruṇaḥ puruṣakṣayaḥ/
 Diṣṭametaddhruvaṃ manye na çakyamativartitum//
 Sametaṃ pāṛthivaṃ kṣatraṃ kālapakvamasamçayam/
 Vimardaḥ sumahānbhāvī māṇsaçoṇitakardamaḥ// *ibid.*, 154.24 & 26

2) Bhīṣmaparvan, 105.12. 3) *Ibid.*, 51.38; also Droṇaparvan, 134.35.

like the enraged Ender (*antakamiva kruddham*);¹ and he wreaks devastation like Time at the destruction of the Yuga (*kāleneva yugakṣaye*).² Elsewhere Arjuna shoots arrows 'resembling the fires of Time' (*kālajvalanasaṃnibhāḥ*),³ and arrows resembling the Ender (*antakopamaiḥ*).⁴ When he fights the Saṃsaptakas, 'armed with his bow he shone forth like Time itself in shape' (*prababhau dhanvī kālo vighrahavāniva*).⁵ He also moves about in battle 'like the Ender with noose in hand' (*pāṇahasta ivāntakaḥ*).⁶ As Arjuna and Karna battle each other they both resembled Yama, Time and the Ender (*yamakālāntakopamau*);⁷ and Arjuna shoots arrows at Karna, each resembling the rod of the Ender (*antakadaṇḍasaṃnibhāḥ*).⁸

On the other side, the mighty warrior Bhīṣma is compared to Time which makes death in a moment (*kālaṃ yathā mṛtyukṛtaṃ kṣaṇena*).⁹ In a terrible battle, Bhīṣma resembles the Ender begotten by Time (*kālasṛṣṭamivāntakam*);¹⁰ and Bhīṣma slaughters the Pāṇḍava army like Time at the destruction of the Yuga (*kāleneva yugakṣaye*).¹¹ Indeed, it would be possible to compile similar lists for each of the principal combatants on both sides, the common denominator being that the battle might of each is compared to the destructive powers of Time. Some of the comparisons, too, are so vivid that Time almost takes on the characteristic of a personalised force that brings destruction to man. For instance, in one of the terrible battles in the *Droṇaparvan* 'People thought: "In this tumultuous battle, Time (itself) swallows the warriors who have been stupefied by Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna."' ¹²

Throughout the battle books, fate and Time are also portrayed as forces

1) *Droṇaparvan*, 50.80; also 61.3.

3) *Droṇaparvan*, 74.7.

5) *Karna-parvan*, 32.

7) *Ibid.*, 63.15.

9) *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 81.20.

11) *Ibid.*, 102.75.

12) *Kālah saṃgrasate yodhāndhr̥ṣṭadyumnena mohitān/*
Saṃgrāme tumule tasminniti saṃmenire janāḥ// Droṇaparvan, 70.24.

2) *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 100.4.

4) *Ibid.*, 78.27.

6) *Ibid.*, 40.91 & 95.

8) *Ibid.*, 66.31.

10) *Ibid.*, 104.39.

that push men on to deeds of terrible destruction, including the grosser violations of *dharma*. Thus in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* it is related how the *kṣatriyas* slew each other with gruesome weapons, 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*).¹ Elsewhere, the text refers to *kṣatriyas* 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*) going to their destruction in battle against Arjuna.² In another particularly terrible battle in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* in which all social bounds broke down, it is described how father slew son, and son slew father, and friend attacked friend 'forced by destiny' or 'through the strength of fate' (*daivabalāt*).³ When Duryodhana and Sātyaki lined up for battle, Duryodhana reflected on their happy childhood shared together and concluded: 'for Time is irresistible' (*kālo hi duratikramah*).⁴ Elsewhere Time drives men to their destruction, with true impartiality. In his final battle Droṇa invoked the celestial Brahmā weapon, and then, 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*) the Pāṇḍavas, Pāñcālas and so on began to approach his chariot to their destruction.⁵ On the other hand, in the great conflict between Karṇa and Ghaṭotkaca, the *rākṣasa* invoked a terrible celestial weapon which showered the Kaurava forces with all sorts of weapons causing enormous devastation. According to the text, this cruel destruction of Kaurava heroes was created by Time (*kālotsṛṣṭe*).⁶ And it was Time, too, that carried Ghaṭotkaca off, and not Karṇa's divine spear. As the sage Vyāsa explained to Yudhiṣṭhira, who was weighed down by the prowess of the mighty Karṇa: 'For, making Indra's spear the instrument, he was struck down by Time.'⁷ Occasionally, too, fate is seen as a force that is partial, and which may protect as well as destroy. Thus after the death of Karṇa, Çalya 'consoles' Duryodhana with the view that it was all the

1) *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 66.17.

3) *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 102.27.

5) *Ibid.*, 165.101.

7) *Vāsaviṃ kārāṇaṃ kṛtvā kālenāpahato hyasau/ Ibid.*, 158.58.

2) *Droṇaparvan*, 18.17.

4) *Droṇaparvan*, 164.28.

6) *Ibid.*, 154.40. See 154.24-39.

doing of fate. Though Karṇa had attacked the two Kṛṣṇas in a battle without equal, nevertheless, 'whatever is fate proceeds beyond our control; (and) it is protecting the Pāṇḍavas and destroying us.' Recalling the many heroes who were vigorous, brave, strong, of numerous qualities and unslayable, yet who had been slain by the Pāṇḍavas, Çalya advised: 'Therefore, do not grieve, O Bhārata, it is fated. The attainment of one's aims alternates (and) there is not always success.'² Occasionally, though, fate is seen as a force that may protect as well as destroy. When Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna is pierced with terrible arrows shot by Kṛpa, his charioteer explains his survival as a consequence of fate (*daivayogāt*).³

Often Time and fate exercise their destructive potentials by deluding and perverting the judgement of the participants, driving them on to acts of folly. Thus when Bhīṣma finally fell, the event was so significant that both sides gathered around him and listened to him talk in favour of peace. However, despite the weighty words of the grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, they again issued forth for battle 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*), and with their 'minds overpowered by Time' (*kālopahatacetasāḥ*).⁴ At another point in battle where Arjuna, in full cry, seems to be everywhere, it is described how the Kaurava troops began to strike each other, and even themselves for, 'Deluded by Time, they believed the world to exist of Pārtha (only).'⁵ And when Karṇa moved forward to do battle with Arjuna, there were terrible portents of destruction, but 'stupefied by fate' the Kauravas paid no attention to them and thought victory was theirs.⁶ At a more individual level, Duryodhana's judgement and awareness

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- 1) Daivam tu yattatsvavaṇam pravṛttam
tātpāṇḍavānpātī hinasti cāsmān/ Karṇaparvan, 68.10.
2) Tanmā çuco bhārata diṣṭameta-
tparyāyasiddhirna sadāsti siddhiḥ// *ibid.*, 68.12.
3) *Ibid.*, 19.53. 4) Droṇaparvan, 1.18.
5) Pārthabhūtamamanyanta jagatkālena mohitāḥ// *ibid.*, 64.43.
6) Karṇaparvan, 26.34-39.

continued to be so blighted, that his own father could only conclude: 'The noose of death is placed before (Duryodhana) who is deluded by the yoke of fate.'¹ Fate, too, is the only explanation that can be found for Duryodhana's unwavering optimism, even as defeat seems increasingly certain. With the destruction of Bhīṣma and the death of Droṇa, the odds moved heavily against the Kaurava cause. But with the installation of Karṇa as general, Duryodhana, 'urged on by Time' (*kālacoditaḥ*), still considered his purpose as attained.² Elsewhere, though, it is a gleeful Duryodhana who deems Arjuna's judgement to be 'assailed by fate' (*daivenopahataḥ*)³ and 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditaḥ*)⁴ when Arjuna rashly vows to slay King Jayadratha by the end of the next day or enter a blazing fire.

Besides acts of death and destruction, fate and Time are also called upon to explain otherwise seemingly inexplicable reverses and failures. For instance, after the mighty Nārāyaṇa weapon had been baffled by Kṛṣṇa, a shattered Aṣvatthāman could only conclude: 'for Time is irresistible' (*kālo hi duratikramah*).⁵ Fate is also freely cited to explain one of the major setbacks to the Kauravas during the battle: the death of King Jayadratha. When Arjuna vows to slay Jayadratha by the next day or enter a blazing fire, Karṇa assures Duryodhana that, devoted to his welfare, he would fight to the best of his abilities. But, he added, 'victory is dependent on fate' (*jayo daive pratiṣṭhitaḥ*).⁶ After the death of Jayadratha, it is Droṇa that Duryodhana turns upon, virtually accusing him of perfidy in not protecting the king from Arjuna.⁷ But Karṇa defends Droṇa for ultimately Jayadratha's death was due to fate: 'I consider (that) whatever is found foreordained by fate will not otherwise be.'⁸ And as Jayadratha had been

1) Mohito daivayogena mṛtyupācapuraskṛtaḥ/ *ibid.*, 10.40.

2) *Ibid.*, 6.44.

3) Droṇaparvan, 120.16.

4) *Ibid.*, 120.20.

5) *Ibid.*, 172.46.

6) *Ibid.*, 120.29. See 120.26-29.

7) *Ibid.*, 127.1-11.

8) Daivadr̥ṣṭo anyathābhāvo na manye vidyate kvacit// *ibid.*, 127.13.

slain despite their utmost exertions, then 'fate here was supreme' (*daivamatra param*).¹

Kaṇṇa then extended this argument even further. Recounting their various efforts to defeat the Pāṇḍavas, Kaṇṇa felt that there was nothing wanting in their efforts, and nothing outstanding in the actions of the Pāṇḍavas. Instead, he concluded: 'it was the action of fate through which our manly effort was frustrated' (*daivasya tatkarma pauruṣaṃ yena nāçitam*).² And it was impersonal and inscrutable fate that Kaṇṇa seemed to have in mind: 'Fate is the authority in all actions, virtuous or otherwise. For fate, its purpose undistracted, watches even the sleeping.'³ Nevertheless, despite the power of fate, Kaṇṇa still argued that men must perform their duties: 'What must be done by a man who acts with real resolution, that should be done fearlessly - (though) success depends on fate.'⁴

Perhaps the most incomprehensible failure in the whole battle is why Kaṇṇa never used his invincible divine spear - guaranteed to slay one enemy - to destroy Arjuna, an act which would have changed the whole battle. The text is quite aware of this glaring anomaly, and explains how each night at their war council, the Kauravas resolved that on the morrow Kaṇṇa should hurl the divine missile at either Arjuna or Kṛṣṇa. However, on each occasion Kaṇṇa failed to throw the divine weapon for his mind was overcome by fate (*daivopahatabuddhitvāt*).⁵

Fate is also part of the explanation why various Kaurava notables fight on in a cause that refused to prosper. For instance, as Bhīṣma lies on his bed of arrows, Kaṇṇa approached and a reconciliation of sorts occurs.

1) *Ibid.*, 127.14.

2) *Ibid.*, 127.24.

3) *Daivaṃ pramāṇaṃ sarvasya sukṛtasyetarasya vā/*
Ananyakarma daivaṃ hi jāgati svapatāmapi// *ibid.*, 127.22.

4) *Yatkartavyaṃ manuṣyeṇa vyavasāyavatā satā/*
Tatkāryamaviçāṇkena siddhirdaive pratiṣṭhitā// *ibid.*, 127.17.

5) *Ibid.*, 158.8. See 158.4-9.

Bhīṣma formally renounced the wrath he had harboured against Karna, and bade him be reconciled with the Pāṇḍavas so that hostilities could end.¹ Karna, however, explained that having partaken of Duryodhana's dominion he could not forsake Duryodhana's cause, even though he had no doubt about the outcome: 'The result which must be cannot be averted. Who is able to avert fate with human effort.'² Thus, though he knew full well that the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa were invincible to other men, nevertheless fight them he would. Therefore, he sought Bhīṣma's permission to fight, and this the old warrior accorded, because for a *kṣatriya* there was nothing better than a righteous battle.³ Accepting the decree of fate, unfavourable though it must be, Karna was prepared to fight on to safeguard his standing as a *kṣatriya*. Perhaps the same may have been the attitude of Duryodhana when, at the beginning of the *Çalyaparvan*, with all his great warriors dead, 'Considering fate and destiny as all-powerful, the king, firmly resolved on battle, again marched forth for the fight.'⁴

In many of the references to fate so far in the battle books, the emphasis, implicit or otherwise, is on fate and Time as all-powerful and invincible forces, which operate quite beyond human influence. However, there are indications in the battle books that this was not the only view. For instance, with the death of Droṇa, the Kauravas held a council of war to appoint a new general. Droṇa's son, Aṣvatthāman spoke first. Reflecting on the god-like Kaurava warriors who had been slain despite their skill, perseverance and devotion, he concluded: 'Passion, exertion, skill, policy have been declared by the learned to be the means for accomplishing purposes - (but) all depends on fate.'⁵ However, in spite of the loss of these warriors they should not despair of victory, for 'with wise policy here in all manner

1) See Bhīṣmaparvan, 117.4-19.

2) Avaṣyabhāvi vai yo artho na sa ṣakyo nivartitum/
Daivam puruṣakāreṇa ko nivartitumutsahet// *ibid.*, 117.24; also cf. Karṇaparvan, 26.54.

3) Bhīṣmaparvan, 117.20-32.

4) Sa daivam balavanmatvā bhavitavyam ca pārthivaḥ/
Saṃgrāme niṣcayam kṛtvā punaryuddhāya nirayau// *Çalyaparvan*, 1.7.

5) Rāgo yogastathā dākṣyam nayaṣcetyarthasādhakāḥ/
Upāyāḥ paṇḍitaiḥ proktāḥ sarve daivasamācṛitāḥ// *Karṇaparvan*, 6.12.

of purposes even fate can be put in the right direction.¹ Therefore Aṣvatthāman recommended they should install Karṇa. The implication in Aṣvatthāman's view is that with the proper effort, fate, far from being inflexible, can be made favourable.

Karṇa, who has such a lot to say about fate, also offers a similar view. When Karṇa is reproved by Kṛpā in the *Droṇaparvan* for his habitual boasting, he replies that he could see no fault (doṣaṃ) with heroes who boasted on the field of battle, for 'When a man mentally resolves to bear a burden, surely fate comes to his assistance in that.'² Freely put, Karṇa's view seemed to be that the harder one tried, the more fate would favour one.³

In his attack upon the victorious Pāṇḍava camp, Aṣvatthāman also seems to view fate as a force that can be circumvented. After unsuccessfully battling the terrible divine image that confronted him before the gate of the camp, Aṣvatthāman could only bemoan the power of fate compared to human effort: 'Who, here on earth, is able to do the truly impossible with strength and power. For manly exertion, it is declared, is never more powerful than fate.'⁴ Aṣvatthāman concluded: 'Therefore, my turning away from battle has been ordained by fate. Unless fate should change, in no way at all shall I be able to begin here.'⁵ Aṣvatthāman, though, was not to be cowed by the power of fate, for as we have seen, he sought the protection of Mahādeva and fully achieved his purpose.

By the end of the great 18 day battle, the post-mortems begin on the terrible

1) Sunītaiṛiḥa sarvārthairdaivamapyānulomyate// *ibid.*, 6.14.

2) Yaṃ bhāraṃ puruṣo voḍhuṃ manasā hi vyavasyati/
Daivamasya dhruvaṃ tatra sāhāyyāyopapadyate// *Droṇaparvan*, 133.27. See 133.25-27.

3) As well, when Karṇa and Arjuna finally face up to each other for their titanic struggle, Brahmā and Īśa inform the other gods that Arjuna would surely be victorious: 'Intelligent, powerful, brave, an expert in arms, devout, that greatly lustrous (man) possesses the entire science of archery. Because of his great majesty he can overcome destiny (itself) whatever its revolutions.'

Manasvī balavāñcūraḥ kṛtāstraṇa tapodhanaḥ/
Bibharti ca mahātejā dhanurvedamaṇḍasataḥ//

Atikramecca mātmyāddiṣṭametasya paryayāt// *Karṇaparvan*, 63.51-52.

4) Aṣakyaṃ caiva kaḥ kartuṃ śaktaḥ śaktibalādiha/
Na hi daivādgarīyo vai mānuṣaṃ karma kathyate// *Sauptikaparvan*, 6.25.

5) Tadidaṃ daivavihitam mama saṃkhye nivartanam/
Nānyatra daivādudyantumiha śakyaṃ kathamcana// *ibid.*, 6.31.

deeds of destruction, and continue for much of the remainder of the text. The enormity of what had happened was evidently so great that explanations in terms of the baleful effects of uncaring fate evidently had a great attraction. Thus on the final day of the battle, as Arjuna surveys the scanty remains of the Kaurava army, he tells Kṛṣṇa: 'The almost endless army of these great-spirited (heroes) has now gone to its destruction in battle: behold fate of such a kind.' And when Saṃjaya informs Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the death of Duryodhana and the all but complete destruction of both sides, he concludes: 'Alas, Time is all-powerful, (and) also its course is supreme, when all the kings, their strength equal to Çakra's, have been slain.'²

Açvatthāman decides in similar fashion as he contemplates the almost total slaughter of the Kaurava forces, despite their strength and skill: 'I consider it to be (due to) the change of Time' (*manye kālasya paryayam*).³ When Queen Gāndhārī surveys and describes the bloody battlefield for Kṛṣṇa, she concludes: '(All) these (warriors) have been slain in battle: behold the changes of Time. Assuredly, O Mādhava, there is nothing too difficult for fate (to bring about) since these heroes, foremost *kṣatriyas* (all), have been slain by *kṣatriyas*.'⁴ And Queen Gāndhārī also bids the grieving widows not to grieve for 'I think this destruction of the worlds has been ordained by the course of Time.'⁵ The great slaughter was inevitable (*avaçyabhāvī saṃprāptā*).⁶

As Duryodhana lies in his last hours, broken and alone on the battlefield, he bemoans that though he had started with 11 armies and many great warriors to fight

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- 1) Anantakalpā dhvajinī bhūtvā hyeṣāṃ mahātmanām/
Kṣayamadya gatā yuddhe paçya daivaṃ yathāvidham// Çalyaparvan, 23.17.
 - 2) Aho subalavāṅkālo gatiçca paramā tathā/
Çakratulyabalāḥ sarve yatrāvadhyanta pārthivāḥ// *ibid.*, 1.17.
 - 3) Sautikaparvan, 1.64.
 - 4) Ta ime nihatāḥ saṃkhye paçya kālasya paryayam/
Nātibhāro asti daivasya dhruvaṃ mādharma kaçcana/
Yadime nihatāḥ çūrāḥ kṣatriyāḥ kṣatriyaṣabhāḥ// Strīparvan, 25.30.
 - 5) Manye lokavināço ayaṃ kālapyāyacoditāḥ// *ibid.*, 15.17.
 - 6) *Ibid.*, 15.17.

for him, 'I have attained to this condition. For Time is hard to overcome.' Vidura, too, consoles Dhṛtarāṣṭra with arguments of the most fatalistic kind. Firstly, Vidura argues that King Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not sorrow for death is in any case inevitable, and one's lifespan is pre-determined and not of one's own choosing. For mortals, matters of life and death were fated:

Everything collected together ends in loss; what rises up ends in falling down; union ends in separation; (and) life ends in death. When Yama, O Bhārata, drags away both the brave and the cowardly, then why should these *kṣatriyas* not fight, O bull amongst *kṣatriyas*. He who does not fight may (still) die, (and) he who does fight may live. O great king, when one's time comes, it can never be averted.²

Time, Vidura argued, was the same to all, therefore the wise should be indifferent to the ups-and-downs of life: 'Thousands of occasions for grief, and hundreds of occasions for fear (occur); daily they overpower the foolish but not the wise. There is no one dear or hateful to Time, O best of the Kurus. Time is never indifferent (to anyone). Time drags all along.'³

However, it is in the *Çāntiparvan* and *Anuçāsanaparvan* that the principal post-mortems - perhaps the longest post-mortem of any battle in literature - are to be found. As we have seen, the intent of these *parvans* is to talk Yudhiṣṭhira through his desolation and out of his intention to retire to the forest. Various lines are taken by different speakers including the argument that it was all the doing of inexorable fate, and not of mortal man. Arjuna, for instance, counsels Yudhiṣṭhira that he should not grieve over what had already happened: 'So truly, what had to be

1) Imānavasthām prāpto asmi kālo hi duratikramah// Çalyaparvan, 63.8.

When Aṣvatthāman, Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman, the only Kaurava survivors, hear of Duryodhana's fall, they hasten to his side. In thankful tones, Duryodhana says they had always striven for his victory, but added that 'fate was hard to overcome' (daivam tu duratikramam). *Ibid.*, 64.29.

2) Sarve kṣayāntā nicayāḥ patanāntāḥ samucchrayāḥ/

Samyogā viprayogāntā maraṇāntāḥ hi jīvitam//

Yadā çūram ca bhīruḥ ca yamaḥ karṣati bhārata/

Tatkiṃ na yotsyanti hi te kṣatriyāḥ kṣatriyaṛṣabha//

Ayudhyamāno mriyate yudhyamānaṣca jīvati/

Kālaṃ prāpya mahārāja na kaṣcidativartate// Strīparvan, 2.3-5.

3) Çokasthānasahasrāṇi bhayasthānaṣatāni ca/

Divase divase mūḍhamāviçanti na paṇḍitam//

Na kālasya priyaḥ kaṣcinna dveṣyaḥ kurusattama/

Na madhyasthaḥ kvacitkālāḥ sarvaṃ kālāḥ prakarṣati// *ibid.*, 2.13-14.

that took place, O bull of the Bhāratas. For, O tiger amongst kings, destiny is incapable of being transgressed.¹ The sage, and purported author of the Epic, Vyāsa, also tells Yudhiṣṭhira not to grieve for 'this is fate' (*diṣṭametad*).²

Bhīṣma, too, assures Yudhiṣṭhira that it is Time that forces a man to perform deeds of all kinds, even though he might be unwilling: 'Destiny, impelled by Time, is determined by the revolutions of Time. Powerless (a man) does deeds good, bad and indifferent.'³ Bhīṣma further advised that the evil that men, such as Yudhiṣṭhira, are driven to commit by Time and hostile fate, are overcome by rites of expiation: 'When man is impelled by Time (and) his prior fate is hostile, then the wise, with their far-seeing vision, behold (all). From that knowledge they allay all evils by performing auspicious acts, muttering prayers as a religious offering, and undertaking rites of expiation here.'⁴

Elsewhere, though, Bhīṣma preaches in rather more fatalistic tones. After proclaiming to Yudhiṣṭhira on detachment and indifference in the face of all life's opposites - pleasure and pain and so forth - Bhīṣma illustrates his teaching with the ancient tradition (*itihāsaṃ purāṇanam*) sung by Maṅki after he had become freed from attachments. Maṅki was desirous of wealth, but met with little luck in its attainment. At last he purchased two young bulls, which he took to the field yoked together. However, the bulls took fright at the sight of a squatting camel and promptly stumbled aside its neck. The camel then rose up and raced off with the bulls dangling on either side. As Maṅki observed his hopes of wealth disappearing on the backs of the camel, he lamented: 'Even a clever man is not able to obtain wealth which is not ordained.'⁵ While he had tried all he could, misfortune alone had come

1) Bhavitavyaṃ tathā tacca yadvṛttaṃ bharatarṣabha/
Diṣṭaṃ hi rājaçārdūla na çakyamativartitum// Çāntiparvan, 22.15.

2) *ibid.*, 27.27.

3) Kālasaṃcoditaḥ kālaḥ kālaparyāyaniçcitaḥ/
Uttamādhama madhyāni karmāṇi kurute avaçaḥ// *ibid.*, 62.10.

4) Daivaṃ pūrvaṃ vikurute mānuṣe kālacodite/
Tadvidvāṅso anupaçyanti jñānadīrghena cakṣuṣā//
Prāyaçcittavidhiṃ cātra japahomāṅga ca tadvidaḥ/
Maṅgalāni ca kurvantaḥ çamayantyahitānyapi// *ibid.*, 103.3-4.

5) Na caivāvihitam çakyaṃ dakṣeṇāpīhitum dhanam// *ibid.*, 171.9.

to him:

For this is pure fate alone. Thence manly effort is not (of avail). Or if anything called manly effort does (seem to) exist, then on looking further, fate alone is found. Therefore he who desires to obtain happiness should become quite indifferent to worldly matters.¹

In the same vein, Bhīṣma cites a further ancient tradition of a discourse between Prahvāda, king of *asuras*, and the *muni* Ājagara, in which the *asura* asks about his lack of desire and state of tranquillity.² The *muni* discourses on the transitoriness of life and all acquisitions and then concludes: 'Seeing that happiness and sorrow, the acquirement of profit and loss, pleasure and discomfort, life and death are dependent on fate, I observe this vow (of non-attachment etc.) with a pure heart.'³

The sage Vyāsa also cites the old story known as Aṣmā's discourse (*aṣmāgīta*), which counsels an attitude of fatalistic resignation before all life's opposites, for these are due to the inscrutable course of inexorable destiny and Time which steadily carry all creatures towards decrepitude and death:

Whether happiness or sorrow comes upon creatures, all is incurred despite one's own desires; there is no escape. O king, in youth, middle and old age, these matters are inevitable; and thence, what one strives after (occurs) otherwise. The absence of what is very agreeable, and also the presence of what is disagreeable, profit and misfortune, happiness and suffering, they (all) follow after fate. And likewise the birth and death of creatures, and the connexion between attainment and manly effort, all this is pre-ordained. Smell, colour, taste and touch originate by themselves; similarly happiness and suffering follow after fate. Seats, beds, chariots, activity, drink and food, they assuredly come to all beings through Time alone. Even physicians become ill. The strong (become) very weak; and also married men (become) eunuchs. The revolution of Time is wonderful. Birth in a noble lineage, manly colour, health, steadfastness, good-fortune, and pleasure, they are (all) attained through fate. ... He whose death is fated dies on account of that. Overcoming (death) is not seen, nor again (can it be) transgressed. For it is seen here (that) a rich man dies in youth, and a poor man, (though) afflicted, (lives) for a hundred years, O King. ... Thus all objects, whether desired or not, come

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- 1) *Çuddham hi daivamevedamato naivāsti pauruṣam//*
Yadi vāpyupapadyeta pauruṣam nāma karhicit/
Anviṣyamāṇam tadapi daivamevāvatiṣṭhate//
Tasmānnirveda eveha gantavyaḥ sukhamīpsatā/ *ibid.*, 171.12-14.
- 2) *ibid.*, 172.3-9.
- 3) *Sukhamasukhamanarthamarthalābham*
ratimaratiṃ maraṇam ca jīvitam ca/
Vidhiniyatamavekṣya tattvato aham
vratamidamājagaram ṣuciṣcarāmi// *ibid.*, 172.30.

upon all beings. A cause is not perceived. ... No one perceives (that) this world is sinking in the deep ocean of Time with its great sharks of decrepitude and death.¹

Even Kṛṣṇa, God incarnate, is inclined to cite fate as the cause of the great destruction. He too advises Yudhiṣṭhira to renounce his grief and to celebrate a sacrifice to expiate the evils incurred in the battle, and consoles him: 'for this was destined to be so' (*bhavitavyam hi tattathā*).² As Kṛṣṇa returned to Dvāraka after the end of the battle and the long-delayed death of Bhīṣma, he comes upon the

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- 1) Sukhaṃ vā yadi vā duḥkhaṃ bhūtānāṃ paryupasthitam/
 Prāptavyamavaçaiḥ sarvaṃ parihāro na vidyate//
 Pūrve vayasī madhye vāpyuttame vā narādhipa/
 Avarjanīyāste arthā vai kāṅkṣitāçca tato anyathā//
 Supriyairviprayogaçca samprayogastathāpriyaiḥ/
 Arthānarthau sukhaṃ duḥkhaṃ vidhānamanuvartate//
 Prādurbhāvaçca bhūtānāṃ dehanyāsaçcathāiva ca/
 Prāptivyāyāmayogaçca sarvametatpratiṣṭhitam//
 Gandhavarṇarasasparçā nivartante svabhāvataḥ/
 Tathāiva sukhaduḥkhāni vidhānamanuvartate//
 Āsanaṃ çayanam yānamutthānam pānabhojanam/
 Niyataṃ sarvabhūtānāṃ kālenaiva bhavantyuta//
 Vaidyāçcāpyāturāḥ santi balavantaḥ sudurbalāḥ/
 Strīmanāçca tathā śaṇḍhā vicitraḥ kālaparyayaḥ//
 Kule janma tathā vīryamārogyaṃ dhairyameva ca/
 Saubhāgyamupabhogaçca bhavitavyena labhyate// *ibid.*, 28.16-23.
 Niryaṇam yasya yaddiṣṭam tena gacchati hetunā/
 Drçyate nābhyaṭikrāmannatīkrānto na vā punaḥ// (26)
 Drçyate hi yuvaiveha vīnaçyanvasumānnaraḥ/
 Daridraçca parikliṣṭaḥ çatavarṣo janādhipa// (27)
 Iti kālena sarvārthānīpsitānīpsitāni ca/
 Sprçanti sarvabhūtāni nimittaṃ nopalabhyate// (32)
 Saṃnimajjajagadidaṃ gambhīre kālasāgare/
 Jarāmṛtyumahāgrāhe na kaçcidavabudhyate// (43), *ibid.*, 28.26-43.

At another point in the *Çāntīparvan*, Vyāsa again discourses to Yudhiṣṭhira on the power of Time and how it had wrought such great destruction. However, far from being an inscrutable power, some effort is in this instance made to reconcile the importance normally attributed to the power of Time and destiny with the theory of karma. Thus, while 'Time took away the breath of their bodies through the law of change' (*Kālaḥ paryāyadharmeṇa prāṇānādatta dehinām*/.4) and 'this (battle) was merely the means employed employed by Time' (*hetumātramidaṃ tasya kālasya* .6), Time is also said to be 'the witness of the acts of creatures' (*karmasākṣī prajānām* .5) and 'to bestow the fruit of our actions' (*kālaphalapradam* .7), be the consequences pleasurable or miserable. It was, concluded Vyāsa, because of their deeds that the *kṣatriyas* had gone to their destruction. Indeed, 'this world revolves so through acts in conjunction with Time' (*Karmaṇā kālayuktena tathedaṃ bhrāmyate jagat*// .10). (See *ibid.*, 34.4-10.) Perhaps later redactors, unhappy at the importance attributed to ideas of fate and destiny have here consciously reduced the power of Time by merely making it the instrument by which the fruit of karma is yielded.

- 2) *Āçvamedhikaparvan*, 2.8.

ascetic Uttan̄ka who asks if a reconciliation between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas had yet been achieved. Kṛṣṇa explained that though he had done his best to secure peace, they had all gone to their mutual destruction, for 'It is not possible to transgress destiny through intelligence or power.'

Despite all these weighty views, Yudhiṣṭhira would seem to only partly accept the power of Time and fate as a cause of the great battle. For at the start of the *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma what would befall they and the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra who, under the power of Time and anger (*kālamanyuvaṣānugāh*), had done this terrible deed.² However, fifteen years later when the aged King Dhṛtarāṣṭra sought permission to retire to the forest, a distressed and emotional Yudhiṣṭhira blurted out that he harbored no resentment in his heart against what Duryodhana had done, 'For it was destined to be so. We and they were stupefied.'³

Finally, as Dhṛtarāṣṭra is about to leave for the forest, a brahmin spokesman for King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's subjects exonerates Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana and Karna from blame for the destruction that had befallen: 'We know that it was fate which is incapable of being repelled. Fate cannot be averted by human effort.'⁴

The final references to fate and Time in the central story of the *Mahābhārata* occur once again within the context of death and destruction. In the eighteenth year after the great battle, Yudhiṣṭhira learns that King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Queen Gāndhārī, and his mother Kuntī, emaciated and weak from their austerities, had been immolated in a forest fire.⁵ Yudhiṣṭhira is duly distraught, condemns the lot of a *kṣatriya* and bewails about 'the course of Time which is assuredly very difficult to understand.'⁶

It is Time and fate, too, that brings one more momentous act of destruction

1) Na diṣṭamabhyatikrāntuṃ ṣakyam buddhyā balena vā/ *ibid.* 52.16.

2) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 1.6.

3) Bhavitavyam tathā taddhi vāyam te caiva mohitāh// *Āṣṭamavāsikaparvan*, 6.10.

4) Daivam tattū vijānīmo yanna ṣakyam prabādhitum/

Daivam puruṣakāreṇa na ṣakyamativartitum// *ibid.*, 16.2; also 16.9-10.

5) Though fortuitously, it turned out, the fire was sacred for it had started from Dhṛtarāṣṭra's own abandoned sacred fires. *Ibid.*, 47.1-27

6) *Ibid.*, 46.9.

in the central story-line of the *Mahābhārata*, the self-carnage of the Vṛṣṇis; although here Time seems to act not as an independent power but as the means for the fulfillment of the curses of the brahmins and Queen Gāndhārī. At the end of the great battle, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the Kaurava widows journeyed to the battlefield where now only the flesh-eating creatures roamed. After surveying the scene, the grief-stricken Queen Gāndhārī turned on Kṛṣṇa as the real villain of the affair. Because the mighty Kṛṣṇa had been indifferent as Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas had slaughtered each other, she levelled a curse that 36 years hence he would bring about the death of his own kinsmen, friends and sons before meeting his own death by a contemptible means (*kutsitenābhyupāyena*).¹ And in due course Time and fate conspire to bring this terrible curse to pass.

Thus Vaiṣampāyana, the narrator of the Epic, recounts that when the 36th year after the battle arrived, 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*)² the Vṛṣṇi's all slew each other with iron clubs. The principal method by which Time and fate engineered the destruction seems to have again been through their power to delude, and cause mortals to act in ill-considered ways.

Vaiṣampāyana relates that one day some Vṛṣṇi warriors saw the great seers Viṣvāmitra, Kaṇva and Nārada arrive at Dvāraka. Thereupon, 'pressed down by the rod of fate' (*daivadaṇḍanipīḍitāḥ*),³ they decided to play a practical joke on the seers. A more ill-considered act could scarcely be considered for of all the great seers to grace Hindu mythology, Viṣvāmitra was certainly the most vindictive and short-tempered. Dressing Kṛṣṇa's son Sāmba up as a woman, they asked the ṛṣis whether she would beget a son or a daughter. Duly insulted the ascetics, eyes red with anger, replied that she would bring forth a terrible iron club (*musalaṃ ghoramāyasam*) for the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas; and they foretold the manner of the death of Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma.⁴

1) Strīparvan, 25.41; See 25.35-42.

2) Mausalaparvan, 2.2.

3) *Ibid.*, 2.5.

4) *Ibid.*, 2.1-11.

When Kṛṣṇa heard he summoned his people and informed them of it, and simply said 'so it must be' (*bhavitavyam tatheti*), for 'the Lord of the universe did not wish to determine fate otherwise.'¹ Now, on the next day Sāmba did produce an iron club. The king of the Vṛṣṇis (Kṛṣṇa's father) ordered that iron club to be ground to fine powder which was then cast into the sea; and it was proclaimed that henceforth whosoever should make spirituous liquor would be impaled with his kinsmen.²

However, while the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas endeavoured to avoid this calamity 'Time (embodied) constantly wandered about all their houses. Formidable, hideous and bald, he was a black man with red-eyes.'³ And day by day many terrible portents, 'urged by Time',⁴ were seen foreboding the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas.

Soon it was the power of Time that asserted itself for the Vṛṣṇis began to shamelessly commit sinful deeds. They showed enmity towards brahmins, gods and ancestors, and they slighted their preceptors. Seeing these omens, which showed the contrariety of Time (*kālaparyayam*),⁵ and realising that Gāndhārī's curse was about to befall, Kṛṣṇa bade the Vṛṣṇis to journey to the ocean coast to bathe in its sacred waters.⁶

After more terrible omens, the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas set out for the ocean taking various kinds of food, meats and intoxicating liquors. Reaching their destination, those warriors of fiery energy (*tigmatejasām*) gave themselves over to drink and revelry. Now in the great battle the Vṛṣṇis had been divided, some fighting for the Kauravas and others for the Pāṇḍavas. Rather appropriately, soon a terrible feud broke out between Sātyaki and Kṛtavarman as to which had behaved more foully in battle: Sātyaki for his slaughter of the defenceless Bhūriṣṛavas, or Kṛtavarman for his part in the night-time raid on the Pāṇḍava camp. Then, 'impelled by the course

1) Kṛtāntamanyathā naicchatkartuṃ sa jagataḥ prabhuḥ// *ibid.*, 2.14.

2) *Ibid.*, 2.16-20.

3) Kālo grhāṇi sarveṣāṃ paricakrāma nityaḥ//
Karālo vikaṭo muṇḍaḥ puruṣaḥ kṛṣṇapīṅgalaḥ/ *ibid.*, 3.1-2.

4) *Ibid.*, 3.6.

5) *Ibid.*, 3.16.

6) *Ibid.*, 3.16-2

of Time' (*kālaparyāyacoditāḥ*),¹ the feud quickly embroiled other Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas. Seeing his own son Pradyumna slain, Kṛṣṇa took up a handful of nearby *eraka* grass which became a terrible iron club, and with this he slew all those before him. Then, as a result of the brahmins' curse, whatever *eraka* grass was taken up by a warrior, became an iron club. And 'urged on by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*),² they all began to strike one another, perpetrating a general slaughter.³ Kṛṣṇa and Rāma alone survived the destruction, but only briefly. Rāma soon abandoned his own body, and Kṛṣṇa was accidentally slain by a hunter called Jarā ('old age') who, mistaking him for a forest deer, shot him in the foot (Kṛṣṇa's one vulnerable spot) with an arrow.⁴ And so the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas, along with Kṛṣṇa, were driven to their destruction by Time acting in fulfillment of the curses of Gāndhārī and the brahmin sages.

Time and fate also account for the final act of destruction in the *Mahābhārata*'s plot. After the carnage of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas and before his own death, Kṛṣṇa sent a message for Arjuna to whom he proposed to entrust his 16,000 wives and those who remained in the capital. After performing the due funeral rites for the fallen, including Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, Arjuna ordered the evacuation of the remaining women, children and aged. As they departed the capital of Dvāraka, the city - as Kṛṣṇa had foretold - was inundated by the ocean. Awed, the departing citizens said: 'aho, it is fate' (*aho daivamiti bruvan*).⁵ Worse was to follow for the survivors were soon seen by terrible *dasyus* called Ābhīras. And 'urged by the revolution of Time' (*kālaparyāyacoditāḥ*),⁶ the *dasyus* fell upon Kṛṣṇa's wives and the remnants of Kṛṣṇa's people, guarded though they were by the renowned Arjuna. But Arjuna found that his once mighty powers were now seriously enfeebled; he even had difficulty stringing the mighty Gāṇḍīva bow, and nor could he remember his divine weapons. Consequently many of the women and much loot were carried off. Filled with sorrow and grief, he concluded that it was due to the workings of

1) *Ibid.*, 4.29.

3) *Ibid.*, 4.1-46.

5) *Ibid.*, 8.41.

2) *Ibid.*, 4.36.

4) *Ibid.*, 5.1-23.

6) *Ibid.*, 8.48.

fate (*daivam tanmanasācintayat*)'; and so, 'considering it to be fate, the Pārtha became despondent'.² When Yudhiṣṭhira heard of the great tragedy that had overtaken the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas, he sadly concluded that 'Time cooks all creatures' (*kālah pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇi*) and became firmly resolved on leaving the world.³ Repeating the word 'Time, Time' (*kālah kāla iti bruvaṇ*), Arjuna now agreed with his older brother's intention.⁴

Outside of the central story-line of the *Mahābhārata*, references to fate and Time as controlling powers in the affairs of the triple-world are significantly less frequent, though this material covers some 50% of the Epic's length.⁵ Perhaps the major reason is that death and destruction do not feature nearly as prominently in this material. Nevertheless, fate and Time are still essentially called upon to explain circumstances that are unusual and unexpected, or truly inexplicable and extraordinary. For instance, on their tour of the *tīrthas*, the Pāṇḍavas came to Kauṣṭhī, the sacred river of the gods, where was found the holy hermitage of Kaṣyapa. Now once upon a time, it is recounted, Kaṣyapa went to this lake and for a long time he exhausted himself with great austerities. However, while bathing in the water he beheld the *apsarās* Urvaśī and shed his seed at the mere sight. Meanwhile a thirsty doe drank the seed with the water and became with young, for 'the destiny appointed by fate unfailingly must be'.⁶ In time the doe gave birth to a great seer, and as he was born with an antelope horn (*ṛṣyaṣṛṅga*), he was called Ṛṣyaṣṛṅga.⁷

Perhaps the most curious or extreme instance of where fate is called upon to explain the inexplicable is when King Yuvanāṣva himself gives birth to his own son

1) *Ibid.*, 8.62.

2) *Babhūva vīmanāḥ pārtho daivamityanucintayan*/ *ibid.*, 8.64.

3) *Parivrājikaparvan*, 1.3.

4) *Ibid.*, 1.4.

5) J.A.B. van Buitenen, 'The Indian Epic' in E.C. Dimock (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.49.

6) *Amoghatvādvīdheṣaiva bhāvitvāddaivanirmitāt*// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 110.15.

7) *Ibid.*, 110.1-18.

Māndhātṛ. Briefly, though King Yuvanāçva observed all the sacrificial and ritual requirements, he remained childless. Therefore he entrusted his kingdom to his councillors and chose to live in the forest. Now one night, suffering from extreme thirst, he entered the hermitage of the seer Bhṛgu, where a special potion of water, purified with spells, had been prepared for Yuvanāçva's wife for the begetting of a son. Exhausted and weary, the king thirstily drank the potion in the dark, and fell asleep. When what happened was discovered, the great seer first reproved the king; but then concluded that what the king had done could not be undone 'for surely this was caused by fate' (*nūnaṃ daivakṛtaṃ hyetaḍ*).¹ And so, through the further performance of a most wondrous sacrifice (*iṣṭiṃ paramādbhutām*), Yuvanāçva overcame the normal biological processes of birth, and begot his own son. Such was the strength of the ṛṣi Bhṛgu's power of *brahman*.²

Besides accounting for extreme and unusual circumstances, fate continues to be cited in circumstances of catastrophe, and suffering. In the story of the seer Viçvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla*, the great twelve year drought is said to be due to the course of fate (*daivavidhikramāt*).³ And fate and Time continue to be forces that drive beings on to their destruction. When Viṣṇu descends to the netherworld in his incarnation as the boar, all the *daītyas*, 'deluded by Time' (*kālamohitāḥ*), quickly proceeded against it, but to no avail.⁴ In this instance, by deluding the demons, Time would seem to act on the side of order and right, and against disorder and wrong. The same would seem to be the case in the myth of the Sāgaras. In search of their father's sacrificial horse, the 60,000 sons of King Sagara, all of whose acts were cruel and terrible, dug down to the netherworld where they saw the horse grazing; and there too they saw the great-souled seer Kapila, blazing with his austerities like fire with its flames.⁵ But in their excitement at finding the

1) *Ibid.*, 126.22.

2) *Ibid.*, 126.5-26.

3) *Çāntiparvan*, 139.13.

4) *Ibid.*, 202.16.

5) *Tapasā dīpyamānaṃ taṃ jvālābhiriva pāvakaṃ*// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 105.25.

horse they, 'impelled by Time' (*kālacoditāḥ*),¹ paid no heed to the great seer. This angered Kapila who opened his eyes wide and shot his energy at them (*tejasteṣu samutsrjan*), burning the cruel Sāgaras down.²

Fate also helps to bring down the mortal Nahuṣa who, because of his austerities and virtuous deeds, was made king of the gods when Indra was afflicted by brahminicide. Due to his exalted position he became filled with pride and began to abuse his divine power, especially against the great brahmin ṛṣis. This proved his downfall, for one day on account of his mind being afflicted by fate (*daivopahatacittatvād*),³ he kicked the great Agastya, and was cursed to fall to earth as a snake.⁴

However, once again fate was not entirely an impersonal force that was completely impervious to human influence and control, for under certain circumstances it does seem possible for a mortal to modify or even escape an ordained lot.⁵ For instance, in the story of Ruru it is related how Pramadvarā was the illegitimate offspring of the *apsarā* Menakā and the king of the *gandharvas*, Viṣvāvasu. Abandoned by her parents, she was brought up by the seer Sthūlakeṣa. Now one day Ruru, the grandson of the great ṛṣi Cyavana, saw her in Sthūlakeṣa's hermitage and immediately fell in love. A wedding was arranged, but a few days before it was to take place she accidentally stepped on a sleeping snake, for 'due to die, she was urged by Time' (*mumūrṣuḥ kālacoditā*). In turn, the snake, 'impelled by the disposition of Time' (*coditāḥ kāladharmanā*), sank its poison into the careless girl and she fell dead on the ground.⁶ However, the story does not end with this tragic death brought about through the power of Time. While Pramadvarā's father and the other brahmin ascetics all wept with pity, the stricken Ruru went into the forest. And there in his great grief he cried out that because of his generosity,

1) *Ibid.*, 106.1.

2) *Ibid.*, 105.1-25, 106.1-3.

3) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 102.25.

4) *Ibid.*, 102.1-29.

5) For a discussion of this theme in Hindu literature, see W. Norman Brown, 'Escaping One's Fate. A Hindu Paradox and its use as a Psychic Motif in Hindu Fiction' in *India and Indology: Selected Articles*, pp.153-60.

6) *Ibid.*, 8.16.

austerities, veneration of elders, self-control, and strict vows, his beloved should be let live (*saṃjīvatu mama priyā*). Thereupon an envoy of the gods appeared and said that though there could be no more life for a mortal whose life had gone, formerly the great-spirited gods had prescribed an expedient (*upāyaścātra vihitāḥ*) for this circumstance. The envoy explained that if Ruru should give half his life to the girl, then she would arise as his bride. To this Ruru agreed and Pramadvarā did arise. And in due course the life of Ruru was shortened by half.¹ In this story the power of Time as the bringer of death remains inviolate; but through extraordinary human devotion and a favourable decree of the gods, the effect is largely circumvented.

In conclusion, it can be said that the range of circumstances in which impersonal fate and Time are cited as the causative force should occasion little surprise. In the face of life's more unpredictable and violent swings of fortune, explanations in terms of the controlling power of fate and Time offer a certain solace and compensation. What is more unexpected is the variety of ways in which they are perceived. In some contexts fate and Time are inscrutable and purposeless, but yet in other contexts they display a more moral dimension. Equally, in various contexts fate and Time are considered to be all-powerful and ineluctable, predetermining all events and actions; but elsewhere they are looked upon as forces that can be overcome or made favourable.

1) See *ibid.*, 8.5-22, 9.1-16.

Chapter 4: Free-Will

While the terms karma, fate and predestination are readily associated with the Hindu tradition, the idea of free-will, which has so vexed the Western philosophical tradition, certainly is not.¹ And it is true to say that in the *Mahābhārata* there is nothing like a detailed philosophical formulation of the concept of free-will or freedom of action. It does not follow, though, that because a problem does not find philosophical expression, it is not conceived of at all. As Levi-Strauss has so brilliantly shown, an essential function of myth is to raise fundamental problems that will subsequently require more precise formulation.² And throughout the *Mahābhārata* there are two particular problems considered both explicitly and implicitly which are closely or even inseparably related to the notion of free-will: the question of human exertion and whether it can effect the course of events, and the idea of individual responsibility.

We have already seen above how the *Mahābhārata's* doctrine of karma accepts the importance of human exertion and the fact of human freedom. Equally, in the bulk of the *Mahābhārata* the doctrine of predestination only limits human freedom, without negating it. However, in these instances human freedom and the importance of human effort are more assumed than emphasised.

In other parts of the *Mahābhārata* the problem of human action is discussed more directly and specifically. No doubt these discussions reflect the intrinsic importance of the problem; but they may also reflect the strength of contemporary

1) cf. W. Norman Brown: 'To the occident there is nothing more characteristic of the Orient at large and of India in particular than belief in the inevitability of fate, usually summed up in the vague phrase "Oriental fatalism". It is not surprising that this trait should be the most easily apprehended by the casual traveller or reader, for "fatalism" is the most frequent "outward and visible manifestation" in the individual of the accumulated Hindu religious and philosophic traditions of nearly three thousand years.' 'Escaping One's Fate. A Hindu Paradox and its use as a Psychic motif in Hindu Fiction,' in India and Indology, p.153.

2) See C. Levi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth' and E. Leach, 'Levi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden: An Examination of Some Recent Developments in the Analysis of Myth', in W.A. Lessa and E.Z. Vogt (eds.), Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach, pp.560-81.

belief in fate and the powerlessness of man, for the purpose of these discussions seems to be to find a place for the workings of human effort and exertion, though admittedly the idea that the individual could ever be in full and total control of his own destiny is hardly even conceived of.

In the *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma which was the more powerful, fate or human effort. Bhīṣma then recounts the ancient history of a conversation on this very subject between Brahmā himself and the great sage Vasiṣṭha; and, with such an impeccable pedigree, it was presumably a discourse that carried weight. Brahmā explains that for the attainment of success of whatever kind, fate and human effort were both important and necessary. Whatever blessings fate might have in store for man would only be fully attained through his own exertions:

As soil sown without seed becomes fruitless, so does fate not succeed without human effort. Human effort is said to be the soil, (and) fate the seed. Thence the crop prospers from the union of the soil and the seed. ... By austerities (one acquires) beauty, good fortune and all sorts of treasures. All can be attained by action; (but) nothing (can be attained) through fate by one who does not act. Likewise heaven, objects of enjoyment, perfection, and what one desires, everything can be attained here through action and human effort.¹

The celestials, *nāgas*, and *yakṣas*, too, had attained to their divine state from a mortal condition through manly effort (*puruṣakāreṇa mānuṣyāddevatām gatāḥ*); and even the blessed Viṣṇu, who created the three worlds with its gods and demons, performed austerities in the waters (*samudre tapyate tapaḥ*). The Pāṇḍavas, too, had regained their kingdom not just through fate, but by recourse to the strength of their arms (*na daivādbhujasaṃprayāt*); and great ascetics cast their curses not through the power of fate, but through the power of their acts (*te daivabalāc-chāpamutsrjante na karmaṇā*).²

Brahmā also specifically repudiated the idea - much debated amongst the

1) Yathā bījaṃ vinā kṣetramuptaṃ bhavati niṣphalam/
Tathā puruṣakāreṇa vinā daivaṃ na sidhyati// (7)
Kṣetraṃ puruṣakārastu daivaṃ bījamudāhṛtam/
Kṣetrabījasamāyogāttataḥ sasyaṃ sampdhyate// (8)
Tapasā rūpasaubhāgyaṃ ratnāni vividhāni ca/
Prāpyate karmaṇā sarvaṃ na daivādakṛtātmanā// (12)
Tathā svargaṇa bhogaṇa niṣṭhā yā ca manīṣitā/
Sarvaṃ puruṣakāreṇa kṛtenehopapadyate// (13) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 6.7-13.

2) *Ibid.*, 6.14-41.

heterodox¹— that acts did not lead to consequences, a belief that undermined all conviction in the need for human exertion, and inevitably led to an attitude of fatalistic resignation: 'If there should be no fruit from one's own actions, (then) all (actions) would be without fruit. But clinging to fate, idle men would not prosper. He who, without performing human action, follows fate, labours in vain, like a woman having obtained an impotent husband.'²

Having established the necessity of both fate and human effort in human action, Brahmā further explained that their effect was actually mutually reinforcing. 'Even as a small fire, fanned by wind, becomes powerful, so fate, joined with human action, grows greatly. As a lamp fades through the diminution of its oil, so does (the influence of) fate with the decrease of (one's) acts.'³ Though the text does not entirely spell it out, presumably the idea is that if a man is fated to attain a fortune, if he exerts himself towards this end his fortune will be great, but if not it will remain small. In short, the more one tries, the more fate will favour one.

While fate and human effort are both stated to be important, it is noteworthy that the overall emphasis seems to be weighted more towards human effort. It is even suggested that by upright behaviour, a man can overcome even the worst doings of fate: 'Virtue is the refuge of the gods. Everything is attained by virtue. How can fate conquer a man who has acquired virtue and rectitude.'⁴ Conversely, evil behaviour cannot be protected by fate: 'Fate does not protect a man who has fallen into greed and folly.'⁵

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- 1) See L.O. Gomez, 'Some aspects of the free-will question in the Nikāyas', Philosophy East and West, vol.25 (1975), pp.81-90.
 - 2) Svam cetkarmaphalam na syātsarvamevāphalam bhavet/
Loko daivam samālambya udāsīno bhavenna tu//
Akṛtvā mānuṣam karma yo daivamanuvartate/
Vṛthā ṣṛāmyati samprāpya patiṁ klībamivāṅganā// Anuṣāsanaparvan, 6.19-20.
 - 3) Yathāgniḥ pavanoddhūtaḥ sūkṣmo api bhavate mahān/
Tathā karmasamāyuktaḥ daivam sādhu vivardhate// 6.43.
Yathā tailakṣayāddīpaḥ pramlānimupagacchati/
Tathā karmakṣayāddaivam pramlānimupagacchati// ibid., 6.43-44.
 - 4) Devānām ṣaraṇam puṇyam sarvaṁ puṇyairavāpyate/
Puṇyaṣīlam naram prāpya kiṁ daivam prakariṣyati// ibid., 6.29.
 - 5) Lobhamohasamāpannam na daivam trāyate naram// ibid., 6.42.

In the *Sauptikaparvan*, Aṣvatthāman explains to Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman his resolve to slay the victorious Pāṇḍavas in their sleep. Kṛpa, in particular, was too shocked at the idea to give a direct reply and instead responded with a discourse on the relative importance of fate and human effort, which was similar to Brahmā's explanation though perhaps it gave more equal weight to the two factors.

There is nothing superior to fate and human effort. All men are bound to and urged on by these two forces. For, O best of men, actions succeed not by fate alone, and not by work alone. Success is consequent on both. For all purposes, high and low, are dependent on both of them. And also, acting and abstaining are always seen (to be from them). Pray, what fruit is produced when a rain-cloud rains on a mountain? But, what fruit is produced when it rains so on a ploughed field. For exertion without fate, and fate with non-exertion are always in vain. What (was said) before (on fate and human effort) is certainly so. As the heavenly rains fall on a properly ploughed field, the seed becomes highly excellent; and so is (the nature) of human success. After considering both (it may seem) fate acts independently. But the wise strive on, having recourse to skill and human effort. For all human purposes are from both, O bull amongst men; and also acting and abstaining are seen (to be from them). Human effort is displayed; but it succeeds through fate. For the doer of action, the fruit is produced in this way. The exertion of able men - even properly performed - forsaken by fate, is seen to be fruitless in the world. Then, men who are indolent and dull rail against exertion; (but) that (view) does not find favour with the wise.'

Perhaps at variance with his emphasis upon the need for human effort and exertion, Kṛpa rather lamely concluded that he did not know what they should do, and could

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- 1) Ābaddhā mānuṣāḥ sarve nirbandhāḥ karmaṇordvayoḥ/
 Daive puruṣakāre ca paraṃ tābhyāṃ na vidyate//
 Na hi daivena sidhyanti karmāṇyekenā sattama/
 Na cāpi karmaṇaikena dvābhyāṃ siddhistu yogataḥ//
 Tābhyāmubhābhyāṃ sarvārthā nibaddhā hyadhamottamāḥ/
 Pravṛttāccaiva dr̥ṣyante nivṛttāccaiva sarvaṣaḥ//
 Parjanyaḥ parvate varṣankiṃ nu sādhayate phalam/
 Kṛṣṭe kṣetre tathāvarṣankiṃ nu sādhayate phalam//
 Utthānaṃ cāpyadaivasya hyanutthānasya daivatam/
 Vyartham bhavati sarvatra pūrvaṃ kastatra niṣcayaḥ//
 Pravṛṣṭe ca yathā deve samyakkṣetre ca karṣite/
 Bījaṃ mahāguṇaṃ bhūyāttathā siddhirhi mānuṣī//
 Tayordaivaṃ viniṣcitya svavaṇenaiva vartate/
 Prājñāḥ puruṣakāraṃ tu ghaṭante dākṣyamāsthitaḥ//
 Tābhyāṃ sarve hi kāryārthā manuṣyāṇāṃ naraṣabha/
 Viceṣṭantaṣca dr̥ṣyante nivṛttācca tathaiva hi//
 Kṛtaḥ puruṣakāraḥ sanso api daivena sidhyati/
 Tathāsyā karmaṇaḥ karturabhīnirvartate phalam//
 Utthānaṃ tu manuṣyāṇāṃ dakṣāṇāṃ daivavarjitam/
 Aphalaṃ dr̥ṣyate loke samyagapyupapāditam//
 Tatrālasā manuṣyāṇāṃ ye bhavantyamanasvinaḥ/
 Utthānaṃ te vigarhanti prājñāṇāṃ tanna rocate// Sauptikaparvan, 2.2-12; also 2.13-19

only suggest that they seek the advice of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura and Queen Gāndhārī.¹ However, if his discourse was designed to dissuade Aṣvatthāman, it did nothing of the sort.

Echoes of the thesis that success in action depended as much on human exertion as on the uncontrollable workings of fate are to be found elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*. Before setting off on his peace mission to the Kaurava court, Kṛṣṇa discussed tactics with the Pāṇḍava brothers. Replying to Arjuna he explained that though the outcome was rendered uncertain by fate, man was nevertheless not completely powerless, and he would therefore do the best he was capable of:

But all this is dependent on the two kinds of action, O repeller. For a field, cleared and fertile, may be made ready by the cultivator, (but) without rain, O Kaunteya, it will never yield produce. Therefore, they advise, irrigation should be effected through human effort; and yet, in that case, one may certainly see (the water) dry up as a result of fate. Therefore, our great-souled ancestors determined this with their wisdom: the cause of worldly affairs is fixed in fate and human effort. Therefore I shall do my utmost as regards human effort. But in no way at all am I able to accomplish a deed that is fated.²

To Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa similarly explains that as it is not possible to determine what is due to human effort and what to fate, then the outcome of all human action is doubtful:

For when the criterion (*dharmasya*) is doubtful, people desiring to know what is (due) to fate and what to human effort can not determine how they work, O Wolf-Belly. That which is the cause of a man's attainment of profit is indeed also (the cause) of his downfall: human action is (always) doubtful. (Actions) perceived one way by wise men who see the flaws, turn out another way, like the impetuosity of wind. A human action performed, which was well-deliberated, well-conducted and properly effected, may yet be opposed by fate. Also fate, causing an action to be unsuccessful, may be frustrated by human effort - like hot and cold, rain, and hunger and thirst, O Bhārata.³

1) *Ibid.*, 2.29-32.

2) Sarvaṃ tvidam samāyattaṃ bībhatso karmaṇordvayoḥ//
Kṣetraṃ hi rasavacchuddhaṃ karṣakeṇopapāditam/
Ṛte varṣaṃ na kaunteya jātu nirvartayetphalam//
Tatra vai pauraṣaṃ brūyurāsekaṃ yatnakāritam/
Tatra cāpi dhruvaṃ paṇyecchoṣaṇaṃ daivakāritam//
Tadidaṃ niṣcitaṃ buddhyā pūrvairapi mahātmabhiḥ/
Daive ca mānuṣe caiva saṃyuktaṃ lokakāraṇam//
Ahaṃ hi tatkarīṣyāmi paraṃ puruṣakārataḥ/
Daivaṃ tu na mayā cākyaṃ karma kartuṃ kathaṃcana// Udyogaparvan, 77.1-5.

3) Jijñāsanto hi dharmasya saṃdigdhasya vṛkodara/
Paryāyaṃ na vyavasyanti daivamānuṣayorjanāḥ//

Therefore, concluded Kṛṣṇa, instead of trying to distinguish the indistinguishable line between fate and human effort, the important thing was to act regardless. And, repeating what was to be a central message of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa emphasised that one should act with an attitude of indifference towards the results. 'O Pāṇḍava, for this world there is no course (open) other than action. Perceiving this, one should be devoted (to action); (and) the fruit will arise from (whatever is) the connection between both (fate and human effort). He whose mind is so resolved, proceeds with actions; he is not disquieted at failure, nor delighted at success.' And true to his words, throughout the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa is always there goading the Pāṇḍavas on to mighty and at times terrible actions of one sort or another.

Now, none of the above analyses could be described as especially sophisticated. In all cases, only two factors are considered whereas in the discourse related by Draupadī to Yudhiṣṭhira, the factors of karma and chance are introduced.² Nor is any closely reasoned attempt made to demarcate boundaries within which fate and human exertion may exercise their sway. It is sufficient to maintain that both play a part. In truth, these analyses are what could be called the common sense view of fate and human exertion; and this is suggested by the frequent appeal to agricultural illustrations. From the simple observation of a peasant on the soil, common

 Sa eva heturbhūtvā hi puruṣasyārthasiddhiṣu/
 Vināṣe api sa evāśya saṁdigdhaṁ karma pauraṣam//
 Anyathā paridrṣṭāni kavibhirdoṣadarçibhiḥ/
 Anyathā parivartante vegā iva nabhasvataḥ//
 Sumantritāṁ sunītaṁ ca nyāyataṣcopapāditam/
 Kṛtaṁ mānuṣyakaṁ karma daivenāpi virudhyate//
 Daivamapyakṛtaṁ karma pauraṣeṇa vihanyate/
 Çītaṁuṣṇaṁ tathā varṣaṁ kṣētipipāse ca bhārata// *ibid.*, 75.5-9.

- 1) Lokasya nānyato vṛttiḥ pāṇḍavānyatra karmaṇaḥ/
 Evaṁ buddhiḥ pravarteta phalaṁ syādubhayānvayāt//
 Ya evaṁ kṛtabuddhiḥ sankarmasveva pravartate/
 Nāsiddhau vyathate tasya na siddhau haṣṭamaṣṭhute// *ibid.*, 75.11-12.
 Compare Kṛṣṇa's earlier advice to Yudhiṣṭhira: 'Thus, he who believes there is anything greater than action, that feeble(-minded) one prates uselessly.'
 Tatra yo anyatkarmaṇaḥ sādhu manye-
 nmoghaṁ tasya lapitaṁ durbalasya// *ibid.*, 29.7.
- 2) See above pp.222-233. Possibly fate is to be taken as including the karmic consequences of past lives, though this is nowhere spelt out.

sense dictated the view that on the one hand there were uncontrollable external forces at work which could assist or destroy all mortal endeavours, and that on the other hand success in life depended on human exertion, even if it did not guarantee the desired result. To this extent, Epic narrators accepted fate but rejected full fatalism.

The simplicity of the analyses, it needs to be noted, may trouble us more than the Epic narrators, for the most important conclusion from their discussions would seem to be that whatever the particular combination of factors, human beings must act, and in particular they must act to fulfill their dharmic duties. This natural concern was especially pressing given the call of the heterodox faiths for individuals to abandon the entrapment of social duties and concerns, and to retire to the forest to work out their own salvation from the sufferings of temporal existence. A general response to this call, particularly from the young, could have led to the collapse of ordered society. Thus the concern with these discussions seems to be more with the simple need to ensure action and the continuance of ordered society.

As well, the concern with *dharma* all but required acceptance of the view that under certain circumstances human actions were meaningful and could effect the course of events. For if fate ruled all and man was deemed to have no control over his destiny, there would be no incentive for individuals to consciously choose to behave in a virtuous or dharmic fashion. It would make far more sense to heed the call of various heterodox groups to renounce all action in pursuit of liberation from conditioned existence; or to adopt an attitude of hedonistic fatalism, of eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die.

These concerns also reflect themselves in the various calls throughout the *Mahābhārata* to shoulder the yoke and exert oneself to the utmost. Though such calls are not concerned to argue the fact of some degree of human freedom, they do at least presuppose it. While the Epic, as we have seen, has much to say about the power of fate, it also has much to say about the importance of human exertion.

Nowhere is the virtue of exertion, and the evil of its opposite, more highly praised than it is for kings.' Thus Vidura, in his droplets of wisdom to the sleepless and anxious King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, advised: 'A man who desires prosperity should give up here six faults: sleepiness, laziness, fear, anger, indolence and procrastination.'² And, continued Vidura: 'No prosperity is found amongst those who are stricken by suffering, careless, heretical, indolent, uncontrolled and devoid of effort.'³ In the *Çāntiparvan*, Bhīṣma advised Yudhiṣṭhira on the cardinal importance of a king being always active and energetic: 'A king, O Yudhiṣṭhira, must be zealously active. For a king who, like a woman, is destitute of exertion, does not deserve praise.'⁴ And 'Knowledge, austerity, and opulent wealth,' continued Bhīṣma, 'all this is possible through determination.'⁵ Elsewhere Bhīṣma emphasised to Yudhiṣṭhira the importance of royal exertion by citing the example of the celestials themselves:

Bṛhaspati has proclaimed that, for kings, exertion is the root of royal duties. Hear from me some verses on this. By exertion the ambrosia was obtained; by exertion the *asuras* were slain; (and) by exertion mighty Indra obtained his superiority over heaven and earth. ... A king who is destitute of exertion, even though possessed of intelligence, will always be conquered by his enemies, like a snake devoid of poison.⁶

Not only is exertion praised, but reliance on fate is specifically condemned. Thus Bhīṣma cites a discourse between a sage and a king who had lost his kingdom in which the sage asks: 'Why, O lord, do you believe there is prosperity in relying

1) cf. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol.3, p.168-170.

2) *Ṣaṭ doṣāḥ puruṣeṇa hātavyā bhūtimicchatā/ Nidrā tandrī bhayaṁ krodha ālasyaṁ dīrghasūtratā// Udyogaparvan, 33.66.*

3) *Duḥkhārteṣu pramatteṣu nāstikeṣvalaseṣu ca/ Na çrīrvasatyadānteṣu ye cotsāhavivarjitāḥ// ibid., 39.48.*

4) *Nityodyuktena vai rājñā bhavitavyaṁ yudhiṣṭhira/ Praçāmyate ca rājā hi nārīvodyamavarjitah// Çāntiparvan, 57.1.*

5) *Vidyā tapo vā vipulaṁ dhanam vā sarvamatadvyavasāyena çakyam/ ibid., 120.43.*

6) *Utthānaṁ hi narendrāṇāṁ bṛhaspatirabhāṣata/ Rājadharmasya yaṁmūlaṁ çlokāṅçcātra nibodha me// Utthānenāmṛtaṁ labdhamutthānenāsuraḥ hatāḥ/ Utthānena mahendrena çraīṣṭhyaṁ prāptaṁ divīha ca// Utthānahīno rājā hi buddhimānapi nityaçaḥ/ Dharṣaṇīyo ripūṇāṁ syādbhujaṅga iva nirviṣaḥ// ibid., 58.13-14 & 16.*

on fate?'¹ The sage advised that the defeated king should ingratiate himself with his enemy, and weaken him from within by deceit and fraud. To this end, reliance on fate could actually be used to weaken one's enemy: 'You should deride human effort, (and) speak (only) about fate to him.'²

Some parts of the *Mahābhārata* even go so far as to argue that the cyclical degeneration of Time through the four *yugas* is not due to Time itself but to the neglect of their duties by kings. If this is so, the effect of a king's actions upon the course of events is about as absolute as can be. Thus in the *Çāntiparvan*, Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira: 'You should have no doubt whether the Age produces the king, or whether the king produces the Age. The king produces the Age.'³ When a king is ruled entirely by the science of punishment (*daṇḍanītyā*), then the best of the Ages, the *Kṛta Yuga*, was produced. Righteousness alone existed; all men were prosperous; the seasons were agreeable and healthy; there was no sickness and men enjoyed long lives; the earth yielded plentiful produce without being ploughed, and so on. However, when the king followed only three of the four parts of the science of punishment the *Tretā Yuga* was produced. A fourth part of unrighteousness was now to be seen, and the earth only yielded produce by cultivation. When the king followed the science of punishment by only a half, then the *Dvāpara Yuga* arose. A half part of unrighteousness (*açubhasya*) was now to be observed, and the earth yielded but a small amount of produce. And when the king entirely abandoned the science of punishment, and oppressed his subjects, then the *Kali Yuga* set in. Righteousness (*dharma*) was now nowhere to be seen; the four *varṇas* ignored their *svadharma*s and followed those of others; men could no longer attain or preserve their prosperity; intermixture of the *varṇas* occurred; Vedic rites no longer yielded merit; diseases appeared and men died before their time; rains were irregular and

1) Daive pratīniviṣṭe ca kiṃ çreyo manyate bhavān// *ibid.*, 105.53.

2) Nindyāsyā mānuṣaṃ karma daivamasyopavarṇaya/ *ibid.*, 106.20

3) Kālo vā kāraṇaṃ rājño rājā vā kālakāraṇaṃ/

Iti te saṃçayo mā bhūdrājā kālasya kāraṇaṃ// *ibid.*, 70.6.

the crops failed. The king, then, was the creator (*sraṣṭā*) of the *Kṛta*, *Treta*, *Dvāpara* and *Kali* Ages.¹

Action and exertion are also especially singled out as exemplary virtues of the warrior class, the *kṣatriyas*. Certainly the most stirring of the *kṣatriya* calls to action and strenuous effort is to be found in the *Udyogaparvan* where, after the failure of Kṛṣṇa's peace mission, Yudhiṣṭhira's mother determines to put some spirit into her ascetically inclined son. Kuntī therefore relates the ancient history (*itihāsam purāṇanam*) of a discourse between Vidurā and her son, and asks Kṛṣṇa to pass it on.

Now Vidurā was a famous and irascible lady of noble birth who was devoted to the *kṣatriya dharma*, and once she berated her son as he lay dejected and miserable after his defeat at the hands of the king of the Sindhus:

Where did you come from? You are not born of your father or me. Without wrath, a small branch in a (big) tree, (you are) a man with the means of a eunuch. You may surrender to despair for as long as you live, (but) for prosperity you must bear the burden. Don't think small of yourself; don't be satisfied with little. Set your mind to great things. Don't be afraid! Be strong! Oh stand up, you coward! Don't lie there defeated! Without pride, you delight all your enemies, (and) give grief to your relatives. ... Why do you lie like the dead, as though struck by lightning? Oh stand up, you coward! Don't lie there defeated! Don't (just) perish you wretch. Be famous for your deeds. Don't be in the middle or last. Stand mighty, do not be low. ... Blazing briefly is better than smoking long. ... As long as (a man) performs manly deeds and runs the ultimate race, he is not indebted to *dharma*, and cannot reproach himself. Whether he wins or loses, the wise do not grieve. He immediately begins anew (and) does not value his life (alone). ... Do not ever seek for the living of begging with a skull - contemptible, vile, disgraceful, wretched, fit (only) for the unmanly. ... May no woman ever bear a son like you, devoid of anger, resolution, and manliness, a delighter of his enemies. Do not just smoke away, blaze up mightily! Attack and slay your enemies! Blaze on the head of your enemies, for an hour or even an instant. A man is measured by his anger and lack of pity. He who is compassionate and patient is neither a woman nor yet a man. Contentment destroys prosperity, and so do tenderness, lack of energy and fear. The inactive man does not achieve greatness.²

1) *Ibid.*, 70.7-25; also cf. *Udyogaparvan*, 130.14-15.

2) Na mayā tvaṃ na pitṛāsi jātaḥ kvābhyāgato hyasi/
Nirmanyurupaṣākhīyaḥ puruṣaḥ klībasādhanaḥ// (5)
Yāvajjīvaṃ nīrāṣo asi kalyāṇāya dhuraṃ vaha/
Mātmānamavamanyasva mainamalpēna bībharah// (6)
Manah kṛtvā sukalyāṇaṃ mā bhaistvaṃ pratisaṃstabha/
Uttiṣṭha he kāpuruṣa mā ṣeṣvaivaṃ parājitaḥ/
Amitrānnandayasarvānnirmāno bandhuṣokadaḥ// (7)

In this fashion Vidurā continued on until her son Saṃjaya protested her harshness, complaining that she addressed her only son as if he were a stranger (*aparaṃ*).¹

However, Vidurā explained that if she were not to speak when he was touched by disgrace (*ayaśasā spr̥ṣṭaṃ*) then her love would be unfounded (*ahetukam*). In gentler tones she again beseeched him to abandon this course which was honoured by fools and condemned by the virtuous. He should follow the way of the strict (*sadvṛttaṃ*), which possessed the qualities of Law and Profit (*dharmārthaguṇayuktena*) and which recognised fate and human effort (*daivamānuṣayuktena*).² Reminding him that the *kṣatriya* had been created for battle and victory, and to always act harshly in the protection of his subjects, she emphasised that it was action that pre-eminently mattered. Despite the recognition given to fate and the uncertainty of results, nothing was achieved without action and effort:

The result of all actions is always uncertain, O dear (son). Those who know it is uncertain may succeed or not succeed. But those who do not act never succeed. Actions without exertion have one characteristic: no result. But with exertion there are two characteristics: there is either a result or there is not. He who knows from the very first the uncertainty of all things drives away success and prosperity to his own disadvantage, O you of royal birth! (A man) should rouse himself, rise up, and yoke himself to actions that bring prosperity. Ever undaunted, he should make up his mind: "This will be!"³

Tvamevaṃ pretavaccheṣe kasmādvajrahato yathā/
 Uttiṣṭha he kāpuruṣa mā ṣeṣvaivaṃ parājitaḥ// (11)
 Māstaṃ gamastvaṃ kṛpaṇo viṣrūyasva svakarmanā/
 Mā madhye mā jaghanye tvaṃ mādho bhūstiṣṭha corjitaḥ// (12)
 Muhūrtaṃ jvalitaṃ ṣreyo na tu dhūmayitaṃ ciraṃ// (13)
 Kṛtvā mānuṣyakaṃ karma sṛtvājīṃ yāvaduttamaṃ/
 Dharmasyānr̥ṇyamāpnoti na cātmānaṃ vigarhate// (14)
 Alabdhvā yadi vā labdhvā nānuṣocanti paṇḍitāḥ/
 Ānantaryaṃ cārabhate na prāṇānāṃ dhanāyate// (15)
 Na tveva jālmīm kāpālīm vṛttimesītumarhasi/
 Nṛṇaṃśyāmayaṣasyāṃ ca duḥkhāṃ kāpuruṣocitāṃ// (23)
 Niramarṣaṃ nirutsāhaṃ nirvīryamarinandanam/
 Mā sma sīmantinī kācijjanayetputramidr̥ṣam// (28)
 Mā dhūmāya jvalātyantamākramya jahī ṣātravān/
 Jvala mūrdhanyamitrāṇāṃ muhūrtamapi vā kṣaṇam// (29)
 Etāvāneva puruṣo yadamarṣī yadakṣamī/
 Kṣamāvānniramarṣaṣca naiva strī na punaḥ pumān// (30)
 Saṃtoṣo vai ṣriyaṃ hanti tathānukroṣa eva ca/
 Anutthānabhaye cobhe nīrīho nāṇute mahat// (31) Udyogaparvan, 131.5-31.

1) *Ibid.*, 133.1-2.

2) *Ibid.*, 133.6-8.

3) Sarveṣāṃ karmaṇāṃ tāta phale nityamanityatā//
 Anityamiti jānanto na bhavanti bhavanti ca/
 Atha ye naiva kurvanti naiva jātu bhavanti te//

This magnificent exhortation to action and effort is no doubt typical of the true *kṣatriya* bardic style before the brahmin redactors went to work.¹ Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, this *kṣatriya* concern with the need for vigorous exertion despite the fact of fate remains, but without the same forthright style.

For instance, while the like of Duryodhana and Duḥṣāsa might proclaim in their despairing moments the powerlessness of man before fate, when the Kauravas discuss tactics it is these same wilful young princes and their supporters who are all for action and effort. Thus, at one point in the *Sabhāparvan*, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra lectures his errant son with an eminently orthodox discourse against acquisitiveness and in favour of contentment and self-control. Duryodhana will have none of it, and hurls at his father an impassioned plea that the essence of being a king was the pursuit of self-interest through individual effort and action. The idle and impotent king never prospered:

O King, your wisdom is full, you reverence our elders, (and) your senses are conquered, (yet) you greatly confuse us who perform our duties. Brhaspati has said the conduct of kings is different from the conduct of the world. Thus, the king should always endeavour to think of his own cause. O great king, the conduct of the *kṣatriya* is to be intent on victory. It may be *dharma* or *adharma*, (but) let it be his conduct, O bull of the Bhāratas. ... Discontent is the root of prosperity; therefore, I desire discontent. He who strives for high position, O king, he is the greatest leader. When there is lordship and wealth, should not self-interest be pursued? Others steal what one acquired before; for they know that is the *dharma* of kings. After agreeing to peace, Indra cut off the head of Namuci; for he considered that was the ever-lasting way with enemies. As a snake (eats) mice, the earth eats these two: a king who does not fight, and a brahmin who does not travel. ... Like a swelling disease, (an enemy) will sever the root of he who, from folly, disregards the prospering of his enemy's side. For, as an anthill formed on the roots devours the tree next to it, so does an enemy, though small, whose power grows continually. O descendant of Ājamīdha, do not be pleased by the good fortune of (your) enemy, Bhārata. ... He who longs for the growth of wealth just as there is growth after birth, does he prosper amongst his kinsmen? (But) power (brings) immediate growth. While we do not gain the Pāṇḍavas' dominion, there will be

Ekagūnyamanihāyāmahāvah karmanām phalam/
 Atha dvaigūnyamanihāyām phalam bhavati vā na vā//
 Yasya prāgeva viditā sarvārthānāmanityatā/
 Nudedvṛddhisamvṛddhī sa pratikūle nṛpātmaja//
 Utthātavyaṃ jāgrtavyaṃ yuktavyaṃ bhūtikarmasu/
 Bhaviṣyatītyeva manaḥ kṛtvā satatamavyathaiḥ/ *Ibid.*, 133.23-27.

1) See J.A.B. van Buitenen (trans. & ed.), *The Mahābhārata*, vol.5, p.178-80.

danger for me. For I will obtain that fortune, or lay slain on the battlefield.'

The idle and impotent king, then, never prospered and Duryodhana had no intention of being either. And even as defeat stared him in the face, Duryodhana, refusing Kṛpa's entreaties to make peace, could console himself with the thought that he had at least exerted himself as a *kṣatriya* should:

But the death of a *kṣatriya* at home is despicable. That death on one's bed at home is strongly against *dharma*. The man who abandons his body in the forest or on the battlefield, after having offered great sacrifices, he attains glory. He is no man who, overwhelmed by old age, dies stricken (and) pitifully bewailing in the midst of weeping relatives.²

Another *kṣatriya* who favoured action and effort above all else was the redoubtable Bhīmasena. Just as Duryodhana could be frustrated at his father's prevarication, so was Bhīma frustrated by his elder brother's preparedness to wile away 12 years in the forest. At one such point Bhīma's feelings got the better of his sense of loyalty and he lectured his brother for his partiality to *dharma* or

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- 1) Rājanparigataprajñā vrddhasevī jitendriyaḥ/
 Pratipannānsvakāryeṣu saṁmohayasi no bhr̥ṣam// (13)
 Lokavṛttādrājavṛttamanyadāha bṛhaspatiḥ/
 Tasmādrājñā prayatnena svārthaḥcintyaḥ sadaiva hi// (14)
 Kṣatriyasya mahārāja jaye vṛttiḥ samāhitā/
 Sa vai dharmo astvadharmo vā svavṛttau bharatar̥ṣabha// (15)
 Asaṁtoṣaḥ ḥriyo mūlaṁ tasmāttam kāmāyāmyaham/
 Samucchraye yo yatate sa rājanparamo nayī// (18)
 Mamatvam hi na kartavyamaḥvare vā dhane api vā/
 Pūrvāvṛttam harantyanaye rājadharmam hi tam viduḥ// (19)
 Adrohe samayaṁ kṛtvā ciccheda namuceḥ ḥiraḥ/
 Ḥakraḥ sā hi matā tasya ripau vṛttiḥ sanātani// (20)
 Dvāvetau grasate bhūmiḥ sarpo bilaḥayāniva/
 Rājānaṁ cāviroddhāraṁ brāhmaṇaṁ cāpravāsinam// (21)
 Ḥatrupakṣaṁ saṁr̥dhyantaṁ yo mohātsamupekṣate/
 Vyādhirāpyāyita iva tasya mūlaṁ chinatti saḥ// (23)
 Alpo api hyariratyantaṁ vardhamānaparākramah/
 Valmīko rūlaja iva grasate vṛkṣamantikāt// (24)
 Ājamīḍha riporlakṣmīr̥mā te rociṣṭa bhārata/(25)
 Janmavṛddhimivārthanāṁ yo vṛddhimabhikāṅkṣate/
 Edhate jñātiṣu sa vai sadyovṛddhirhi vikramaḥ// (26)
 Nāprāpya pāṇḍavaḥcāryaṁ saṁḥayo me bhaviṣyati/
 Avāpsyē vā ḥriyaṁ tām hi ḥeṣyē vā nihato yudhi// (27) Sabhāparvan, 50.13-27.
- 2) Gr̥he yatḥkṣatriyasyāpi nidhanaṁ tadvigarhitam/
 Adharmaḥ sumahāneṣa yacchayyāmarāṇaṁ gr̥he//
 Araṇye yo vimuñceta saṁgrāme vā tanuṁ naraḥ/
 Krātūnāhṛtya mahato mahimānaṁ sa gacchati//
 Kṛpaṇaṁ vilapannārto jarayābhiparīplutaḥ/
 Mriyate rudatām madhye jñātīnāṁ na sa pūruṣaḥ// Ḥalyaparvan, 4.30-32.

Law, and for not giving Profit and Pleasure their due. Law, Profit and Pleasure, Bhīma argued, should all be pursued equally. Nor did Bhīma believe that Yudhiṣṭhira was practising the *dharma* as a true *kṣatriya* should. For a *kṣatriya* the *dharma* could only be pursued through the exercise of power (*tejasā*). Wealth was not to be obtained through the brahmin's timidity (*klaibya*) and practice of begging: 'Be awake, O Indra among kings; know the eternal duties. You have been born to cruel deeds from which (another) man would recoil.'¹

Therefore, concluded Bhīma, shedding his undue concern for *dharma*, Yudhiṣṭhira should take up the challenge and regain his kingdom through strength and cunning.

Make your heart a *kṣatriya*'s heart, throw off this weakness of mind, show your manly vigour O Kaunteya, (and) carry the burden like a beast of burden. For, O king, never has a king with an entirely *dharma*-like nature conquered the earth, nor prosperity, nor again wealth. For by using his tongue on the many base and greedy-minded (people), he acquires a kingdom by deceit, like a porcupine its meal. The *asuras*, elder brothers (of the gods), who were in all ways very prosperous, were vanquished by the gods through deceit, O Bull of the Pāṇḍavas. Knowing that everything belongs to the strong, O Lord of the Earth, you must with your strong arms slay your enemies through recourse to the deepest deceit.²

So, advised Bhīma, repudiating their agreement with deceitful arguments, they should that very day take up their weapons, mount their chariots, and regain their kingdom and fortune from the Dhārtarāṣṭras.³

The importance of human action and exertion is also to be found emphasised in at least some of the *Mahābhārata*'s appealing animal fables, a form of literature which was directed more towards ordinary folk than kings and warriors. These tales uphold the view that timely human effort can change the course of events for the better, while idleness merely leads to ruin. Fate, as a factor in human action, is either ignored or downplayed.

In the *Çāntiparvan*, Bhīṣma relates the tale of the three Çakula fish who, all good friends, lived together in a lake. Of the three fish, one was noted for its

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- 1) Anubudhyasva rājendra vettha dharmāsanātānān/
Krūrakarmābhijāto asi yasmādudvijate janah// Āraṇyakaparvan, 34.52.
 - 2) Sa kṣātram hrdayam krtvā tyaktvedam çithilam manah/
Vīryamāsthāya kaunteya dhuramudvaha dhuryavat//
Na hi kevaladharmātmā prthivīm jātu kaçcana/
Pārthivo vyajayadrājanna bhūtim na punah çriyam//
Jihvām dattvā bahūnām hi kṣudrānām lubdhacetasām/
Nikṛtyā labhate rājyamāhāramiva çalyakah//
Bhrātarah pūrvajātāçca susampddhāçca sarvaçah/
Nikṛtyā nirjitā devairasurāḥ pāṇḍavarṣabha//
Evaṁ balavataḥ sarvamiti buddhvā mahīpate/
Jahi çatrūnmahābāho parām nikṛtimāsthitaḥ// *Ibid.*, 34.55-59.
 - 3) *Ibid.*, 34.80-85.

forethought (*dīrghadarçī*, 'far-seeing'), another for its presence of mind (*prāptakālañño*, 'knowing an opportune time'), and the third for its dilatoriness and procrastination (*dīrghasūtram*, 'spinning a long yarn'). Now, one day some fishermen came to that lake and began to drain away its waters to a lower ground through various channels. The fish noted for its foresight warned his two companions of the impending danger to the creatures in the lake, and suggested they hasten elsewhere while they could: 'For he who wards off impending misfortune with wise conduct does not incur danger.'¹ The dilatory fish replied: 'You have spoken truly. But as yet there is no need for urgency. This is my opinion.'² And the fish with presence of mind replied: 'When the proper time comes, I never fail in decision.'³ After hearing their replies, the fish who had foresight and great intelligence swam by the current to another deep lake. When most of the water had gone, the fishermen began to catch and tie up in bundles the fish left there. However, the fish who had presence of mind placed himself in the midst of some bound fish, and by biting the string he looked as if he was caught. When the fishermen took their catch to deeper water for washing them, the fish with presence of mind was able to quickly escape. But the dilatory fish, who was dull-witted, senseless and of weak understanding (*mandātmā hīnabuddhiracetanaḥ*) went to its destruction. Therefore, the tale concluded: 'Those who act after consideration and who are attentive prepare properly. Considering time and place they attain the fruit.'⁴

A little further on Bhiṣma relates the tale of King Brahmadata and the bird Pūjanī, which extolls human effort and rejects the idea that Time alone is the sole determiner. Now Pūjanī had lived for a long time with King Brahmadata in his palace, and though a bird she had great knowledge and was fully conversant with

1) Anāgatamanarthaṃ hi sunayairyaḥ prabādhate/ Na sa saṃçayamāpnoti ... Çāntiparvan, 35.7.

2) So abravītsamyagucyate/ Na tu kāryā tvarā yāvaditi me niçcitā matiḥ// *ibid.*, 135.8.

3) Prāpte kāle na me kiṃcinnyāyataḥ parihāsyate// *ibid.*, 135.9.

4) Parikṣyakārī yuktastu samyaksamupapādayet/

Deçakālāvabhipretau tābhyāṃ phalamavāpnuyāt// *ibid.*, 135.23; see 135.1-23.

dharma. While residing there she gave birth to a son, and at the same time the king also had a son by his queen. Daily Pūjanī would proceed to the ocean shore to obtain a special fruit, that gave strength and energy, for her son and the king's son. But one day after Pūjanī had departed, the prince, while playing with the young bird, happened to crush it to death with his force. When Pūjanī returned she wept bitterly, and rued all friendship with *kṣatriyas*. Swearing vengeance she pierced the eye of the prince with her talons.

Thereupon King Brahmadata accepted what had happened as a justified settling of accounts, and requested that she continue to live in his palace. There should be no enmity between them. But Pūjanī lengthily argued that she could not in all wisdom continue to live there: hearts could never forget. The king then tried a different argument: it was Time that had brought their sorrows. 'It is Time that does the work. And so actions of manifold sorts take place through Time alone. Who, (then), commits an offence against whom in this world? ... Time always causes the happiness and suffering of embodied creatures.'

For the wise bird Pūjanī, the argument that Time alone determined human actions was a palpably flawed one to be firmly rejected:

If Time is the measure of this (i.e. action), (then) nobody should be hostile (towards another). But why do kinsmen retaliate when their relatives are slain? Why did the gods and *asuras* formerly slay each other if it is through Time that there is death, happiness and suffering, existence and non-existence? Why do physicians desire to administer medicine to the sick, if they are ripened by Time? What need is there with medicine? Why do those who are insensible with their very great grief indulge in lamentation? If Time is the measure of (all) this, how can there be moral merit amongst those who perform actions?²

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- 1) Kālena kriyate kāryaṃ tathaiva vividhāḥ kriyāḥ/
Kālenaiva pravartante kaḥ kasyehāparādhyati//
Kālo nityamupādhatte sukhaṃ duḥkhaṃ ca dehinām// *ibid.*, 137.45 & 48.
 - 2) Yadi kālaḥ pramāṇaṃ te na vairaṃ kasyacidbhavet/
Kasmāttvapacitiṃ yānti bāndhavā bāndhave hate//
Kasmāddeṃvāsuraḥ pūrvamanyonyamabhiḥjaghnire/
Yadi kālena niryāṇaṃ sukhaduḥkhe bhavābhavau//
Bhiṣaḥ bheṣajaṃ kartuṃ kasmādicchanti rogiṇe/
Yadi kālena pacyante bheṣajaiḥ kiṃ prayojanaṃ//
Pralāpaḥ kriyate kasmātsamahāñçokamūrchitaiḥ/
Yadi kālaḥ pramāṇaṃ te kasmāddharṃ asti kartṛṣu// *ibid.*, 137.50-53.

Pūjanī didn't deny that fate played a part in human action, but she did reject the view that human exertion played no part:

Fate and human exertion are dependent as a consequence of each other. (But) action is the principal characteristic of the distinguished, (while) eunuchs honour fate. Whether severe or slight, a beneficial act should be done. The idle (and) disinterested (man) is always swallowed by misfortunes. Therefore even when a matter is uncertain, prowess should still be put forth. Even disregarding everything, men should do what is for their welfare.¹

However, if human effort was so important, the implication followed that Pūjanī was responsible for what she had done; and if men should do what is of benefit to them, then Pūjanī could not but stand in the king's enmity. In the end, the wise bird went elsewhere.²

In addition to the above where the importance of human exertion and its ability to change the course of events is directly considered, there is much material in the *Mahābhārata* which indirectly or implicitly puts the same view. It is important to realise that the Epic bards do not seem to have looked upon man as a small insignificant entity in the workings of the universe. In the interdependent world of Hindu conception, man was an important and active participant in the affairs of the triple-world, with perhaps even a claim to be the central participant. And in many parts of the *Mahābhārata*, it is assumed in one way or another that man does have the power to change the course of events in his favour. Epic man's ability to order the world around him would seem to be exercised through four principal means, which must now be considered: sacrifice (*yajña*), austerities (*tapas*), devotion (*bhakti*), and knowledge (*jñāna*).

In parts of the *Mahābhārata* the concept of sacrifice remains of importance, but

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- 1) Daivaṃ puruṣakāraṣca sthitāvanyonyasaṃcayāt/
 Udāttānāṃ karma tantraṃ daivaṃ klībā upāsate//
 Karma cātmahitaṃ kāryaṃ tīkṣṇaṃ vā yadī vā mṛdu/
 Grasyate akarmaçīlastu sadānarthairakimcanaḥ//
 Tasmātsaṃcayite apyarthē kārya eva parākramaḥ/
 Sarvasvamapi saṃtyajya kāryamātmahitaṃ naraiḥ// *ibid.*, 137.78-80.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 137.1-109.

certainly it is no longer the predominant concern that it had been during the Vedic period. By origin the Vedic sacrifice was predominantly a propitiatory and supplicatory ceremony, a part of man's ceaseless search to obtain good and ward off bad. Through the sacrifice man won the support and favour of the gods by his offerings of food and above all of *soma*, the divine drink of immortality, which provided the gods with the prowess and strength they needed for their eternal conflict with the forces of disorder and chaos represented by the demons. The gods, in turn, protected man from the demonic threat; and, if pleased, provided the sacrificer with more concrete and worldly gifts such as wealth, cattle and horses, vigorous offspring, long life, victory in battle, freedom from disease and sin, and so on. The relationship was one of mutual reciprocity: the gods needed the sustenance men provided; and men needed the protection and favour of the gods. The Vedic sacrifice was the principal mechanism that secured the alliance.'

Nevertheless, even in the *Rg Veda* traces of a much more complex set of ideas are to be found in which the sacrifice is seen as the efficient cause in the creation and continued operation of the cosmos.²² However, it is not until the *Brāhmaṇas* that this magico-cosmic interpretation of the sacrifice becomes predominant, resulting in 'a ritual system which, in complexity of detail, far surpasses anything the world has elsewhere known.'²³ The cosmic ideology which came to underlay the sacrifice is explained by R.N. Dandekar as follows:

A Vedic sacrifice was believed to be an autonomous religious system. It operated and became effectual independently of any extraneous factor. The Law of sacrifice was at once deterministic and inexorable. Further, a Vedic sacrifice was regarded not as a mere propitiatory rite - it was believed to possess a profound cosmic significance. A cultic act established a magical rapport with the entire cosmos. A sacrifice was not only a representation in miniature of the cosmic order, but it was also a necessary condition for the proper working of the cosmic order. A sacrifice is very aptly compared to clock-work which must be wound up in order that the world should be kept going. It may be noted that the performance of specific cultic rites was made

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- 1) W. Norman Brown, 'Early Philosophical Speculation in the Rg Veda', in *India and Indology*, pp.79-80; and A.A. Macdonell, 'Vedic Religion', in Hastings, *op.cit.*, vol.12, pp.610-611.
 - 2) Brown, 'Early Philosophical Speculation ...' *op.cit.*, p.81 and pp.199-218; Macdonell, *op.cit.*, p.611; and Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.454-5.
 - 3) Macdonell, *op.cit.*, p.601.

to correspond with the rhythmic course of nature. Several sacrifices can be shown to have been intended as yearly rites for cosmic regeneration.¹

Although the ideas may seem strange, the logic is simple enough for essentially it is based on mimetic or imitative magic. Mimetic magic works on the idea of establishing identities between a controlling ritual and the natural phenomena that it is desired to control. The crucial element is that the controlling ritual should copy and parallel the natural phenomena to be controlled, whether the means be physical, symbolic or verbal. If the ritual accurately corresponds, then whatever is done in the ritual should yield a parallel result in the natural world.²

The use of voodoo dolls in popular magic illustrates the working of the principle of mimetic magic at its most basic, and such simple applications abound in the Vedic literature.³ By comparison the Vedic sacrifice is merely the principle of imitative magic applied on the truly grand scale, for here the natural phenomena to be simulated and controlled is the whole universe. Not surprisingly, then, the *Brāhmaṇas* placed great emphasis upon the need for detailed and exact knowledge of the sacrifice, in order to establish the sacrificial layout and procedure as a microcosm with the correct mystical correspondences to the universal macrocosm; for it was only if the sacrifice was a true and accurate miniature copy of the universal structure that it could be used as an instrument to order and arrange the powers inherent in the universe. Correct knowledge on the part of the performer and officiating priests was an absolute prerequisite for the successful performance of a sacrificial rite. Given the power of the sacrifice, the slightest error could indeed have disastrous consequences, rebounding on those who were the sponsors and officiants.

Now, from the point of view of the position of man, this developed sacrificial

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- 1) R.N. Dandekar, 'Hinduism', in C. Jouco Bleeker and G. Widengren, Historia religionum: Handbook for the History of Religions, vol.2, p.262; also see 'Sacrificial Mysticism' in S. Dasgupta, Hindu Mysticism, pp.1-27, and T.J. Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition, pp.17-35.
 - 2) T.J. Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition, p.27.
 - 3) Keith, op.cit., vol.2, pp.388-90.

ideology had quite enormous consequences. Thus even the ordered continuity of the triple-world was deemed to be dependent not upon the gods but upon the sacrifice, and its priestly officiants. Through their detailed knowledge of the sacrificial minutiae, the priests believed that they had the power to compel the gods to do their bidding, and also to compel natural phenomena without any longer requiring the favour of the gods. As W. Norman Brown notes: 'The most important element in the sacrificial ritual was the wording employed in it. This consisted of the mantras "holy utterances" which constitute the hymns, their enunciation, metres, and chants, all of which when used correctly had a magical effect. Recited exactly and properly intoned the mantras were all-compelling; the sacrificer's purpose was sure to be accomplished.' The *Brāhmaṇas*, wrote A.B. Keith, 'degrade the sacrifice from the position of an appeal to the bounty of heaven to the position of the greatest power on earth, which controls the gods and produces whatever is desired by the priests.'²

But such an extreme state of affairs could not endure. In time the extravagant importance attributed to the sacrificial ritual, and the dominant influence exercised over society by its brahmin officiants, helped to stir up intellectual and social discontent; and this at a time when northern India was undergoing profound political, economic and social changes.³ The result can be seen in the *Upaniṣads* and the non-Vedic heterodox faiths, wherein are found quite new forms of religious and philosophical thinking which had little time for the pretensions of the old sacrificial ritual.

The position of the sacrifice in the *Mahābhārata*, however, is ambiguous. In parts a shadow is definitely cast over the whole idea, while in other parts it remains a significant concern, though certainly not the central concern it was in

1) Brown, 'Early Philosophical Speculation ...' *op.cit.*, p.81.

2) Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.2, p.380.

3) See A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, pp.28-42; T. Ling, *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon*, pp.37-83; D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, pp.104-226.

the Vedic literature. It should be recalled that formally the *Mahābhārata* is recounted by the bard Ugraśravas at King Ćaunaka's great 12 year sacrifice in the Naimiṣa forest, and Ugraśravas had in turn heard the Epic recounted by Vaiṣampāyana at King Janamejaya's Snake Sacrifice.¹ Much emphasis is also laid on the duty of kings and *kṣatriyas* especially to sacrifice to the gods, and many kings are approved for their great sacrificial feats and for the rewards they attained;² and the general duty to sacrifice to ancestors is often repeated. The concept of sacrifice is highly praised at some points. For instance, the great ascetic (*mahātapāḥ*) Devasthāna tells Yudhiṣṭhira: 'The Placer created wealth for sacrifice; and he designated man to be a protector (of wealth) and a sacrificer. Therefore, all wealth should be employed in sacrifice, whereupon objects will be without interruption.'³ And King Janamejaya tells Vaiṣampāyana: 'Therefore, nothing is found in this world equal to the fruit of sacrifice. This is my belief, and that is doubtlessly so.'⁴ It is even said that Indra became the king of gods through the celebration of various opulent sacrifices;⁵ and Mahādeva became God of gods (*devadevo*) by offering into the sacrifice his own self.⁶ And it was to sacrifice that the gods owed their superiority and defeat of the demons.⁷ On one occasion Brhaspati, priest to the gods, sacrificed into the fire with flesh whereupon the *asuras* began to waste away and were destroyed by the gods.⁸ Even the demons are often said to perform sacrifices.⁹

One way or another the duty to sacrifice is proclaimed almost too often to be

1) Ādiparvan, 1.1-10.

2) e.g. Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 94.3.

3) Yaṣṭiāya sṛṣṭāni dhanāni dhātṛā

yaṣṭādiṣṭaḥ puruṣo rakṣitā ca/

Tasmātsarvaṃ yaṣṭiā evopayojyaṃ

dhanam tato anantara eva kāmah// Ćāntiparvan, 20.10.

4) Tasmādyajñaphalaistulyaṃ na kiṃcidiha vidyate/

Iti me vartate buddhistathā caitadasaṃṣayam// Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 94.2.

5) e.g. Ćāntiparvan, 20.11; Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 94.4.

6) Ćāntiparvan, 20.12.

7) Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 3.7.

8) Ćālyaparvan, 40.26-27.

9) Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 3.6. However, the logical problem of whether the gods sacrifice to themselves, and the demons to the gods, is nowhere considered.

worth citing, perhaps if only because sacrificial fees were the bread and butter of the brahmin's very existence.¹ However, there does seem to be an important change of emphasis when compared to the Vedic concept. To begin with, there is little concern in the *Mahābhārata* with the performance of the great Vedic *ṣrauta* rituals, and when they are performed the ritual details and magical correspondences are scarcely even considered.² More significant, there are only remnants of the concern with the sacrifice as a microcosmic device for the ordering of parts or all of the universe or macrocosm. Thus, when King Janamejaya hears of how his father Parikṣit had been slain by the king of snakes, Takṣaka, he summoned his priests who were skilled in sacrifice and asked if there was a rite by which Takṣaka and his kin could be led into the blazing fire. The priests laid out according to the scriptures the Session of the Snakes: 'Then the rite took place according to the ordinances of the Session of the Snakes. Each of the sacrificial priests duly went about his functions. Having put on black garments, their eyes red from the smoke, they sacrificed into the flaming fire with the proper spells.'³ And then all the snakes, hissing, writhing about and quite powerless, were pulled towards that dread sacrifice where, amidst terrible cries, they fell into the blazing flames. Takṣaka, in the meantime, had taken refuge with his friend Indra, but ultimately not even the king of gods could stop the great snake from being pulled towards the sacrifice. However, at the very moment Takṣaka was about to drop into the flames, the seer Āstika brought a stop to the sacrifice.⁴

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- 1) For brahmins, perhaps the ideal ruler was king Dilīpa, who, at every sacrifice he celebrated, gave the chief priest a sacrificial fee of a thousand elephants made of gold. *Āntiparvan*, 29.66.
 - 2) Yudhiṣṭhira's Royal Consecration and Horse Sacrifice are the notable examples. However, as the editor of the *Āṣvamedhikaparvan* points out, the details that are given of Yudhiṣṭhira's Horse-Sacrifice would suggest that significant parts of the complicated ritualism had fallen into abeyance. R.D. Karmarkar (ed.), *The Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, p.471.
 - 3) *Tataḥ karma pravavṛte sarpasatre vidhānataḥ/
Paryakrāmaṇṣṇa vidhivatsve sve karmaṇi yājakāḥ//
Paridhāya kṣṇavāsāṇsi dhūmasaṃraktalocanāḥ/
Juhuvurmantravaccaiva samiddhaṃ jātavedasam//* *Ādiparvan*, 47.17-18.
 - 4) *Ibid.*, 47.1 - 53.10.

In similar fashion, when Parāçana hears how his father the seer Çakti, the eldest of Vasiṣṭha's 100 sons, had been eaten by the *rākṣasa* possessed King Kalmāṣapāda, he resolved to sacrifice with the Session of the *Rākṣasas*. The great hermit burned the *rākṣasas*, young and old, until various seers, including Vasiṣṭha, bade him end the rite for they wished the *rākṣasas* to live.¹

King Drupada is another who uses the power of the sacrifice to exact revenge. Obsessed by his humiliating defeat by the brahmin Droṇa, and the loss of half his kingdom, Drupada wandered amongst the brahmin settlements in search of a brahmin seer with the ritual knowledge capable of begetting a son for the destruction of Droṇa. Eventually he found two brahmin seers named Yāja and Upayāja with the necessary sacrificial knowledge. After Yāja had offered into the flames the proper oblation, there arose from the sacrifice the mighty warrior Dhṛṣṭadyumna, the ordained slayer of Droṇa, and the beautiful maid Draupadī.²

On another occasion, when the gods were oppressed by the Kapas demons, they sought the protection of the brahmins who performed an appropriate rite (*karman*) for their destruction.³ And when a certain King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, angered at the sudden death of his cattle, rashly offered them as *dakṣiṇa* to the ṛṣi Baka, the great practitioner of *tapas* (*mahātāpās*) became filled with rage and offered the flesh of the dead animals into the sacrificial fire for the destruction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's kingdom. The kingdom immediately began to wane, and was only saved by the king falling at the ṛṣi's feet and beseeching his grace (*prasādam*). Thereupon the ṛṣi poured oblations (*juhāva punarāhutīm*) on the sacrificial fire for the liberation of the kingdom.⁴ However, in this instance, it is perhaps not entirely clear whether the principal source of power is the sacrifice, or the *tapas* of the ṛṣi.

But despite these examples, there is no doubt that the magico-cosmic interpretation of the sacrifice, through which mortal man could manipulate the universe, had definitely seen its day. As well, in other parts of the Epic, the

1) *Ibid.*, 172.1-17.

3) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 142.1-18.

2) *Ibid.*, 155.1-50..

4) *Çalyaparvan*, 40.1-23.

great Vedic sacrifices, with their demand for animal offerings, are openly disparaged. The growing concern with *ahimsa* or non-violence would seem to be the principal explanation. For instance, upon the completion of Yudhiṣṭhira's grand Horse-Sacrifice, a section has been added in which a mongoose (*nakulo*) appears and proclaims that Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrifice was not equal to a *prastha* of barley that had been given away by a certain brahmin observing the *uñcha* vow. When the officiating brahmins defended the accuracy and correctness of their sacrificial performance, the mongoose recounted the story of this brahmin.¹

Though observing the severe *uñcha* vow, by which he gleaned ears of grain like a pigeon, the brahmin lived at Kurukṣetra with his wife and children, all the time practising severe penances. Now one time there took place a dreadful famine in which the brahmin and his family suffered much, afflicted by great hunger. With much difficulty the brahmin managed to gather together a *prastha* of barley, and after grinding it he gave each member of his family a share equal to a *kuḍava* (12 double handfuls). As they were about to sit down to eat a brahmin guest came to their house. After receiving the stranger with all the rites appropriate to a guest, the brahmin offered his purified barley. The brahmin guest ate it all but remained hungry. Thereupon his wife proffered her share, but seeing his wife stricken with severe hunger, the brahmin did not approve. However, after his wife had discoursed on the duties of her station, the brahmin took it to the guest, who promptly ate it all, but still remained hungry. Thereupon exactly the same scene is enacted with the brahmin's son and daughter-in-law. Having eaten all the starving family's food, the guest - who was none other than the god Dharma in human form - lauded the brahmin's mighty feat of giving and adherence to duty. The fruit of this act was greater than that to be obtained from many Horse-Sacrifices and many Rājasūya Sacrifices with opulent sacrificial fees. With this deed, explained Dharma, the

1) Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 92.1-22.

brahmin and his family had conquered Heaven, whereupon a celestial car descended to carry them up.' From this episode the narrator Vaiṣampāyana concluded: 'By no means, O King, should you feel wonder at sacrifice. Through austerities, millions of ṛṣis have gone to heaven. Kindness to all creatures, contentment, good conduct, honesty, austerities, self-control, truth and gifts are regarded as equal.'²

Without a doubt this added episode can be considered as an interpolation reflecting society's growing concern with non-violence, a doctrine fervently promulgated by the Buddha and Mahāvīra, and preached by Aśoka. When King Janamejaya asked Vaiṣampāyana why the mongoose deprecated the sacrifice, the narrator related how formerly Çakra celebrated a great sacrifice. However, when the animals to be sacrificed were seized, the great ṛṣis were filled with pity for them, and exclaimed: 'This method of sacrifice is not auspicious.' (*nāyaṃ yajñavidhiḥ çubhaḥ*)³ The ṛṣis then lectured the king of gods: 'O Lord, this undertaking of yours is destructive of *dharma*. This is not the *dharma* of the virtuous; injury is not said to be (a part of) *dharma*. ... O you of a thousand eyes, sacrifice (instead) with seeds that have been well kept for three years.'⁴ However, under the power of pride and folly (*mānamohavaçānugah*), Indra did not accept their words.⁵

In other parts of the *Mahābhārata* the Vedic concept of sacrifice is not so openly disparaged, but it is still appreciably downgraded in importance. This is especially so where the merit of other religious practices, such as visiting sacred sites, gift-giving, fasting, self-control, and truthfulness, are said to be equal to

1) *Ibid.*, 93.1-82.

2) Na vismayaste nṛpate yajñe kāryaḥ kathaṃcana/
Rṣikoṭisahasrāṇi tapobhīrye divaṃ gatāḥ//
Adrohaḥ sarvabhūteṣu saṃtoṣaḥ çilamārjavam/
Tapo damaçca satyaṃ ca dānaṃ ceti samaṃ matam// *ibid.*, 93.92-93.

3) *Ibid.*, 94.12.

4) Dharmopaghātakastveṣa samārambhastava prabho/
Nāyaṃ dharmakṛto dharmo na hiṃsā dharma ucyate//
Yaja biḥjaiḥ sahasrākṣa trivarṣaparamoṣitaiḥ/ *ibid.*, 94.14 & 16.

5) See Āçvamedhikaparvan, 94.8-22. cf. Çāntiparvan, 324.1-5 where the gods and ṛṣis again dispute over whether goats or seeds should constitute the sacrificial offering.

one or other, or even all, of the great Vedic sacrifices.¹ At least part of the appeal of these alternative practices to the grand Vedic rites is suggested by Yudhiṣṭhira in his observation that sacrifices were only for the wealthy such as kings and princes, and certainly not for the poor and powerless.²

Though the conception of the sacrifice as an instrument through which mortals could order and arrange the universe at will had declined by the time of the *Mahābhārata*, faith in man's controlling power certainly had not. During the Epic period it is through the all-important notion of *tapas* that man continued to exercise his sway over the phenomenal world.

The word *tapas* is derived from the root *tap* 'to be hot', 'to burn', and it therefore signifies, in the first instance, warmth or heat.³ Man in ancient India exhibited a great fascination for the mysterious qualities of fire and heat, and over the course of time the word came to assume a wide range of pregnant meanings, though the idea of heat and warmth remained central to them all.

The fascination of ancient India is hardly unusual for, as has been readily recognised, notions of fire and heat have played a very important general part in man's religious consciousness. In The Psychoanalysis of Fire, Gaston Bachelard writes:

Fire is a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and stay there, latent and pent-up, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and apocalypse. It is a pleasure for the good child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being and it is respect. It is tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation.⁴

For the ancient world much of the mystery attached to fire came firstly from its

1) e.g. Anuṣāsanaparvan, 110.1-137.

2) Ibid., 110.1-3.

3) For an etymological study of the root, see R.L. Turner, A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages, pp.322-23.

4) G. Bachelard, The Psychoanalysis of Fire, p.7, cited in Knipe, In the Image of Fire: Vedic Experiences of Heat, p.47.

essential but violently unpredictable contribution to life, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, from the common belief that fire lay inherent in objects being brought forth by some form of friction or kindling.

The phenomenon of heat exhibits, if anything, these qualities in even greater degree, for it is so obviously yet mysteriously linked to life and the loss of life, to creation and destruction. As David Knipe puts it:

Not 'where there is smoke there is fire' but where there is fire there is heat - a primal energy, irreducible power, being, life. A sacred contract pertains where man can generate from the heat of friction the fire which in turn lends its heat for human procreation; man feeds fire, and the fire nourishes man with light and warmth. Heat is limitless, mobile, bound to no 'space'. It enters or departs from space (the human body, the air, the universe) like breath, and life, not subject to the will, accompanies (sic). Heat, like fire, combines the qualities of Rudolf Otto's *mysterium: majestas, tremendum, fascinans*.¹

Fire and heat, then, can easily be perceived as having the quality of the divine about them.

Evidence of the mysterious attraction that heat and fire exercised over the mind of ancient Indian man extends back to the earliest times of the *Rg Veda*, and even before into Indo-Iranian times.² From early on the phenomena of fire and heat (more especially heat), are cited in a wide range of contexts. For instance, at the naturalistic level the heat of the atmosphere which generates rainfall is referred to by the term *tapas*, as is the warmth that is necessary to bring fertility to the fields, and to ripen the seeds and crops of the earth. In these instances, heat is part of the fecundity of nature which is often viewed in terms of an unpredictable and promiscuous sexual force that generates all life. Still in the world of the organic, heat is associated with the begetting of progeny amongst all creatures. Amongst humans, *tapas* is especially associated with the heat of passion, desire and sexual contact. *Tapas* also refers to other instances where the body manifests heat, such as sweating, exertion, rage, jealousy, envy, misery, fever and digestion.³

1) D.M. Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.49.

2) *Ibid.*, p.111; Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.300.

3) See C. Blair, *Heat in the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda*, pp.4-9; W.O. Kaelber, 'Tapas, Birth and Spiritual Rebirth in the Veda', *History of Religions*, vol. 15 (1976), pp.377-78; Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.102.

Obviously, too, in the natural world heat is a phenomenon which is both creative and destructive. Much as it may be vital to life, its effect is ambivalent.

The importance and impressiveness of heat in the natural world was such that it was but a natural process for early Indian man to extend the concept to the mythology and ritual through which he attempted to understand the world around him. Thus, though there is no one unified cosmogonic myth in the Vedic literature, it is almost invariably *tapas* which provides the creative and energising element in them. For instance, in the *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa* it is related:

Verily, in the beginning this (universe) was water, nothing but a sea of water. The waters desired, 'How can we be reproduced?' They toiled and became heated; when they were becoming heated, a golden egg was produced. The year, indeed, was not then in existence: this golden egg floated about for as long as the space of a year. In a year's time a man, this Prajāpati, was produced therefrom; ...

Thereupon Prajāpati created earth, atmosphere and heaven; and 'Desirous of offspring, he went on singing praises and toiling. He laid the power of reproduction into his own self. By (the breath of) his mouth he created the gods: ...' Prajāpati then created the rest of the universe.

In other Vedic creation myths too, as Deussen notes, 'the creator of the universe prepared himself for his work by the practice of *tapas*.'² In another long creation myth in the *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it is described how Prajāpati first came into being from the non-existent. And 'Now this Person Prajāpati desired, "May I be more (than one), may I be reproduced!" He toiled, he practised austerity. Being worn out with toil and austerity, he created first of all the Brahman (neut.), the triple science.' Then 'he (again) practised austerity' and generated the primal waters; and 'He desired, "May I be reproduced from these waters!" He entered the waters with that triple science. Thence an egg arose.'

1) *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XI, 1,6,1-11, translated by J. Eggelling, *Çatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*, vol.5, pp.12-14.

2) P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads*, p.66.

Prajāpati again desired that it should multiply: "May it become more than one, may it reproduce itself!" And so 'He toiled and practised austerity; and worn out with toil and austerity' he hatched the egg and brought about the birth of the material earth. Desiring the earth to reproduce and multiply, Prajāpati 'entered into union with the Earth', from whence an egg arose producing wind and air. Successively, in this fashion, he generated the sun, the sky, the moon, the stars and the quarters. After creating the worlds, he desired to generate creatures. And so 'By his Mind (*manas*) he entered into union with Speech (*vāc*): he became pregnant with eight drops. They were created as those eight Vasus.' Becoming repeatedly pregnant in this fashion, Prajāpati first gave birth to all the gods, and then all other creatures.'

In these myths, it needs to be noted, *tapas* refers firstly to the discipline by which the waters, and then Prajāpati, deliberately heat themselves up to a state of creativity, and secondly to the creative power, or perhaps energy, that is so produced. Thus *tapas* refers to both the technique and the result. It should also be apparent how the models of heat at work in the natural world have been transposed to the myths for we successively find ideas of desire, symbolic sexual union (heat in dark waters, the kindling process), biological birth, the generation and brooding of eggs,² explicit sexual union and the generation of embryos.

It is important to note in the above that Prajāpati's creative *tapas* does not seem to be a natural attribute that he can utilise at will. Instead, just as the creation of fire and heat for ancient man required considerable physical

1) *Ṣatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 6.1.1.1-1.2.12 translated by J. Eggelling, *op.cit.*, vol.3, pp.143-151.

2) It is an important motif in Hindu cosmogony. As Edgerton notes, in certain contexts the word *tapas* 'undoubtedly suggests the creative warmth that is symbolised by the brooding of a bird over its eggs. Notions of the development of the universe out of a cosmic egg appear not infrequently in early Hindu cosmogonies, and with it is clearly associated the belief in *tapas*, warmth, as a force of cosmic evolution.' F. Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p.27; also Winternitz, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.99, 220.

effort, so even for Prajāpati the generation of his creative heat or *tapas* required hard labour and exertion. However, the implication followed that others, besides Prajāpati, who chose to perform the hard discipline could generate the mighty power of *tapas*.

Thus we hear in the Vedic literature that the created gods achieved their divine status in the first place through *tapas*,¹ and that Aṣṭakā was only capable of bearing the mighty Indra through her *tapas*.² And in the *Ṛg Veda*, Indra 'heats himself' before battle with Vṛtra,³ and then defeats the great serpent by surrounding it with heat.⁴

Yet more important is the fact that men, too, could and did cultivate the technique of *tapas*, and thus they appropriated to themselves the vital creative power of the universe. Logically this made men as powerful as the gods, and as the Vedic period progressed men came to see themselves as even more powerful.⁵ By men, though, we should principally understand brahmin priests and ṛṣis, who were to be the foremost practitioners of *tapas*. For instance, in the beginning the *Vedas* were seen (*apaṣyam*) by the ancient ṛṣis 'with their *tapas*'.⁶ The ṛṣis⁷ are said to be born of *tapas* (*tapoja*) and to be 'very hot' (*tapīṣṭha*) like a ritual vessel that Agni heats and to radiate a fiery halo. In the *Atharvaveda* it is described how the devotional energy of a *brahmacārīn* or religious

1) cf. *Ṣaṭpatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.5.1.1 'Verily, in the beginning, Prajāpati alone existed here. He thought within himself, "How can I be propagated?" He toiled (*ṣram*, 'to weary oneself') and practised *tapas* (*tapo atapyata*, 'heated himself'). He created living beings.' Eggelling, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.384.

2) Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.116. 3) Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.300.

4) Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.110.

5) As Knipe writes: 'Man in ancient (and later) India desires to produce heat, and to reduce (sic) fire, himself. Hebraic man, for example, sees Yahweh in fire theophanies - in the burning bush, a pillar of fire or tongues of fire - and he knows the fiery wrath of his God, and he utilises a consecrated fire in purification rites, etc. But he is not apt to make homologies between the fire of Yahweh and himself. So intent is Vedic man upon taking up the heat of the gods, even the heat of the beginning of the world, as his own, that eventually he does without the gods, and he is the cosmos. He has become This All.' Knipe, *op.cit.*, pp.90-91.

6) Kaelber, *op.cit.*, p.379; Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.112.

7) According to Gonda the term ṛṣi may be related to Lithuanian *aršūs*, 'violent, heated' and German *rasen*. J. Gonda, *Vision of the Vedic Poets*, p.40.

student was such that he could fill his *guru*, his ancestors and even the gods with *tapas*.¹ Indeed, through their *brahmacarya*, which rested upon *tapas*, the *brahmcārīn* and Vedic ascetic accumulated sexual power in themselves which could be discharged to effect rainfall and fertility.² The *tapas* of a brahmin was also considered capable of ruining a king who had wronged him.³ *Tapas* also became an important element in the evolving theory of the sacrifice, and there are numerous references to the sacrificial priests generating the heat of *tapas* as part of the performance. This was often manifested in sweating and various states of heated religious fervour.⁴ As well, the power of *tapas* was employed to destroy not just *rākṣasas* and other literal enemies of the sacrifice, but also the ritual enemy of impurity. *Tapas* became a primary agent for purification,⁵ for heat, it will be recalled, can destroy as readily as create.

Brahmins, though, were not the only performers of *tapas* in the Vedic literature. Before the sacrifice, the sacrificer (normally a *kṣatriya*) had to undergo the *dīkṣā* or consecration rite in which he was required to heat himself up and so generate the ascetic power of *tapas* through various ritualised forms of self-mortification such as observing silence, fasting, seclusion, growing the hair, beard and nails, and chastity. This was a necessary preparation for the sacrificer's purification and spiritual rebirth from the sacrifice itself.⁶ The *dīkṣā* rite, as Kaelber demonstrates, was modelled on the biological process of birth.

As faith in the sacrifice reached for the heights, confidence in the priestly power of *tapas* knew no limits. For instance, the description of the *Agnicayana* sacrifice in the *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which was increasingly the most exalted of the sacrifices, was prefaced with a description of the creation of

1) Knipe, *op.cit.*, pp.96-97.

2) J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity*, p.296.

3) Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.300.

4) Knipe, *op.cit.*, p.97.

5) Kaelber, *op.cit.*, p.381.

6) See *ibid.*, pp.343-76; and Keith, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.300-303.

the universe which begins that in the beginning there was just the non-existent. Then Prajāpati - here the mythical personification of the sacrifice - was generated through the *tapas* of the *r̥sis* or seers, who are equated with this non-existent. Prajāpati then generated all reality (i.e. the universe) by his performance of *tapas*.¹

Though faith in the physical performance of the sacrifice had declined by the *Upaniṣads*, faith in the power that *tapas* bestowed on men continued to grow. In the earlier *Upaniṣads*, interest in the mental performance of sacrifices remained, for it was considered that knowledge of the mystic and esoteric significance of the ritual was in itself as effective as the physical performance. But *tapas* remained as important to the mental sacrifice as it had been to the physical for it was necessary for the sage to heat himself up with meditative and mental effort.² However, the real knowledge the Upaniṣadic sages sought was not that of the sacrifice but that of the ultimate ground of existence, and the relationship of the individual to it. In this search the Upaniṣadic position regarding *tapas* was not consistent. For some, knowledge alone mattered and *tapas* was considered of no effect. For others, the power of *tapas* was accepted, but compared to knowledge was deprecated as an inferior, secondary way to realisation of the Absolute or *Brahman*. For yet others the practice of *tapas* was considered quite indispensable to the attainment of such knowledge.³ As the *Maitri Upaniṣad* put it: 'If one does not practice austerity (*tapas*), there is no success in the knowledge of the Soul (*ātman*), nor perfection of works.'⁴

Whatever the differences of opinion, the theory and practice of *tapas* are

1) *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 6.1.1.1-4, Eggelling, *op.cit.*, vol.3, pp.143-4.

2) See Kaelber, *op.cit.*, pp.379-80; and F. Edgerton, 'The Upaniṣads: What Do They Seek, and Why?', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.49 (1929), pp.97-121.

3) A.S. Geden, 'Ascetism (Hindu)', in Hastings (ed.), *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.88-89.

4) *Maitri Upaniṣad*, 4.3, cited in R. Hume, *op.cit.*, p.421.

given wide recognition in the *Upaniṣads*, and this was part of a general pattern. Though the Vedic tradition had always given an important position to *tapas*, outside of its bounds *tapas* producing ascetic practices had flourished amongst heterodox circles. Over the centuries their strength and influence was to totally transform the orthodox tradition. An important adaptation evident as early as the *Upaniṣads* was the theory of the *āśramas*, the four stages of life. With the formal acceptance into the orthodox tradition of the life of the anchorite in the forest (*vānaprastha*) and the renouncer (*saṃnyāsīn*), in theory ascetism and *tapas* became obligatory, at least in the later years, for all twice-born.

In the *Mahābhārata* there are few concepts more important than that of *tapas*. Belief in *tapas* as a power capable of controlling the triple-world was perhaps at its height during the Epic period. There are innumerable references throughout the *Mahābhārata* to a god, or the gods generally, having practised *tapas*. Perhaps the foremost divine performer of *tapas* was the great God Śiva. When Brahmā and the gods, oppressed by the might of Vṛtra, approached Śiva on Mount Mandara, so great was his inner heat that they 'beheld a mass of fiery energy as radiant as millions of suns.'¹ The great-spirited Viṣṇu performed *tapas* (*tapastaptam*) on the Himavat Mountains for the sake of a son (*putrārthe*).² The powerful Prajāpati created all this universe with *tapas*.³ It was through *tapas*, too, that the gods attained their exalted position.⁴ Formerly on the northern side of the Himavat Mountains, the gods and the Lord of Creatures, purified with sacrifices and *tapas*, reached the world of Brahmā.⁵ At the *tīrtha* of Phalakivana the gods performed abundant *tapas* (*tapascharanti vipulam*) for many thousands of years.⁶ The god Tvaṣṭṛ created

1) *Apaścyaṇstejasām rācīm sūryakoṭisamaprabham*// *Droṇaparvan*, 69.57.

2) *Çāntiparvan*, 314.7.

3) *Ibid.*, 155.2.

4) *Ibid.*, 155.12.

5) *Ibid.*, 185.20.

6) *Araṇyakaparvan*, 81.72.

the demon Vṛtra by first performing *tapas* (*tapastaptvā*) for many hundreds of years.¹ To Yudhiṣṭhira, the sage Nārada explained that Yama's magnificent Divine Hall had been fashioned by the celestial architect Viṣvakarman after performing *tapas* for a long time (*dīrghakālaṃ tapastaptvā*).²

As we have seen, demons and even *rākṣasas* frequently practise *tapas*, and normally with more spectacular results for their motives are invariably destructive. However, the main practitioners of *tapas* in the *Mahābhārata* turn out to be mortals, most notably the great *ṛṣis*, *munis* and *tapasvins*, who forever parade through the text. These ascetics - or *ṛṣis* as we shall refer to them - play an intimate part in the affairs of the triple-world, a role which is throughout based on the power of their inner heat or *tapas*. The power of their *tapas* is such that they can change the course of events at will and lord it over all creatures within the triple-world. Only the great Gods, who in their transcendent form are beyond the triple-world, remain outside their sway. Before considering the activities the *ṛṣis* undertake, it is necessary to appreciate the position they are perceived to occupy in the triple-world.

Here we must recall that in the Epic cosmogonic myths, Brahmā specifically creates a select group of *ṛṣis* who are then entrusted with the task of begetting offspring and thereby propagating the creation. For this reason the text normally refers to them as Prajāpatis or Lords of Creatures. The responsibility, which places them above all other creatures in the creation including gods and demons, is an onerous task. Their purpose is not so much to create the material world - for this is invariably undertaken by Brahmā before their creation - but to instil it with life. Taking over Brahmā's creative role they become the creators of all living beings giving birth to gods, demons, *rākṣasas*, other *ṛṣis* and *munis*, men, birds, animals, fishes, trees, plants and so on. It is instructive to recall that in the *Mahābhārata* version of the great

1) Droṇaparvan, 69.54.

2) Sabhāparvan, 8.31-32.

flood, Manu takes into his ark the seeds of all living creatures, and the Seven Ṛṣis. They alone survive the cataclysm whereupon they propagate a new creation.¹ The role of the ṛṣis as creators of all beings is especially prominent in the Epics, but it also appears in the Vedic literature, and in the Vedic *saṃhitās* themselves. For instance, several times in the *Atharvaveda*, the Seven Ṛṣis are referred to as *bhūtakṛts* or 'makers of being';² and, as we have seen, in one *Brāhmaṇa* passage the ṛṣis are even said to have brought Prajāpati into being through their *tapas*.

There is no full agreement in the *Mahābhārata* on who exactly Brahmā's mind-born sons are, although invariably one of two well-defined lists of the Seven Ṛṣis is given. The first list comprises Viśvāmitra, Jamadagni, Bharadvāja, Gotama (or Gautama), Atri, Vasiṣṭha, and Kaśyapa, and is well-known in the Vedic literature, especially in the *sūtras* which normally append Agastya as well, terming him the 'eighth' ṛṣi. The second list, consisting of Marīci, Atri, Aṅgiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, and Vasiṣṭha, first becomes prominent in the Epics before predominating in the *Purāṇas*.³

While the Seven Ṛṣis - whichever list is given - are normally the producers of all forms of life, nevertheless very particular attention is given to their role as the progenitors of the various races of mankind. In terms of Indian social organisation these ṛṣis are of special importance for they are considered to be the founders of the main *gotras* or ancestral lineages of the Aryan people. Theoretically, at least, all true Aryans should be able to trace their line of descent to one of these ṛṣis. The *gotra* system has been well analysed by Professor John Brough, and we need not enter into its considerable complexities here.⁴ Suffice it to say that, according to Brough, the origins of

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 185.

2) J.E. Mitchiner, *Traditions of the Seven Ṛṣis*, pp.295-6. 3) *Ibid.*, pp.3-78.

4) See J. Brough, 'The Early History of the Gotras', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1946, pp.32-45, and 1947, pp.76-90; and J. Brough, *The Early Brahmanical System of Gotra and Pravara*, pp.xi-xviii, and pp.1-51.

the *gotra* system, first systematically listed in the *Sūtra* literature, may be traced back to the 'hymn-families' of the *Ṛg Veda* who reputedly composed or 'saw' the Vedic hymns, although they form a clan rather than a family in the narrower sense. Brough then explains that among the brahmins, as well as many other castes in Hindu society, marriage is restricted in three ways: a man may not marry outside his *jāti* or 'caste'; a man may not marry his *sapinda*s, or those who share with him in the funeral oblation to a common ancestor; and a man must marry outside his *gotra* or 'clan'. The *gotra* is defined 'as an exogamous patrilineal sibship, whose members trace their descent back to a common ancestor',¹ that is, one of the original *ṛṣi*s. Whether these primordial *ṛṣi*s are based on historical fact, and whether they really are the ancestors of the families who claim descent from them, is beside the point; because a direct line of descent is perceived, then marriage is forbidden.²

The finer details of the *gotra* system are outlined principally in the *Gr̥uta Sūtra* literature, and the *Mahābhārata* itself has little to contribute; although some myths do lay special emphasis on the *ṛṣi*s as not just the creators of all creatures, but as the progenitors of the various races of mankind.³ However, in any consideration of the position of the *ṛṣi*s in the Epic, *gotra* is inevitably an important factor for the brahmin redactors of the *Mahābhārata* would all have claimed descent from one ancient *ṛṣi* or another. In other words, the remarkable degree of attention that is devoted to the doings of these primordial *ṛṣi*s springs from the desire of brahmin authors to glorify and exalt the importance of their *ṛṣi*; and by implication to magnify the position of their own family lineage. For instance, V.S. Sukthankar, the editor of the Critical Edition of the

1) Brough, *The Early Brahmanical System ... op.cit.*, p.2.

2) A complicated situation is made even more complicated by the further requirement that a man may not marry a woman who has the same *pravara* as himself, a *pravara* being a list of names of somewhat later *ṛṣi*s who are also believed to be ancient ancestors or founders of the family. *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

3) e.g. *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 85.1-43.

Mahābhārata, has noted that a disproportionate amount of attention is given to the exploits of the ancestral representatives of the Bhṛgu or Bhārgava priestly clan or *gotra*:

Taking a collective view of the Bhārgava references in the Great Epic, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the Bhārgava heroes occupy a surprisingly large portion of the canvas - which is said to depict the Bhārata War - filling up as they do much of the available space of the background. ... The figures of the Bhārgavas have also been magnified to colossal proportions, painted with a thick brush and in vivid colours. Their myths and legends are uniformly distributed over the entire extent of the Great Epic with the exception of some short and uninteresting *parvans*.¹

Sukthankar was led to conclude that the original warrior epic had been subjected to a thoroughgoing revision at the hands of brahmin redactors from the Bhārgava clan of priests.²

While the Bhṛgus may perhaps be an extreme case in the *Mahābhārata*, the other principal *ṛṣis* too are so highly lauded by their descendants that the *ṛṣis* are undoubtedly the foremost beings in the Epic triple-world (mortal though their origins may be)³ with the power to influence the course of events at will. The basis of their power throughout is that of inner heat or *tapas*. Examples of the great power of the *ṛṣis* in the *Mahābhārata* are so numerous, that they could easily fill a volume of their own. Our analysis will necessarily be much briefer.

To begin with, at one point the *Çāntiparvan* makes an important distinction amongst the *ṛṣis* which would seem to be generally borne out in the text. After explaining to the gods their duties, Viṣṇu relates how he had created the *ṛṣis* Marīci, Aṅgiras, Atri, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu and Vasiṣṭha to follow the Religion

1) V.S. Sukthankar, 'The Bhṛgu and the Bhārata: a Text-Historical Study,' Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, vol.18, p.67.

2) Ibid., pp.67-76. For an analysis of the Bhārgava cycle of myths see R.P. Goldman, Gods, Priests and Warriors: The Bhṛgu of the Mahābhārata.

3) Note that when the God Viṣvakarman gave the earth away to Kaçyapa as a sacrificial fee, the Goddess Earth furiously complained that she could not be given away to a mortal (Na mām martāya bhagavankasmaiciddātumarhasi/). See *Aranyakaparvan*, 114.17-20.

of Action (*pravṛttidharmīṇas*), to be the foremost of those conversant with the *Vedas*, and to teach the *Vedas*. Similarly, the ṛṣis Sana, Sanatsujāta, Sanaka, Sasanandana, Sanatkumāra, Kapila, and Sanātana were created to follow the Religion of Renunciation (*nivṛttaṃ dharmamāsthītāḥ*) to be the foremost knowers of *Yoga* and *Sāṃkhya* philosophy, and to teach the scriptures on liberation (*mokṣaṣāstre*).¹

Now, while occasionally a *nivṛtti* ṛṣi such as Sanatsujāta and Sanatkumāra do make a brief appearance in orthodox society to deliver some learned discourse on *mokṣa*, we hear much more of the *pravṛtti* ṛṣis. We will, however, hear more of the views of the *nivṛtti* ṛṣis in the next section for their concern was not with the this worldly, heaven centred concerns of *pravṛtti*, but with liberation (*mokṣa*) from the fetters of phenomenal existence through knowledge, for which the supernatural powers of *tapas* were at best a distraction.

When they are not said to be in Heaven, the principal position the *pravṛtti* ṛṣis seem to occupy in orthodox society is that of the *vanaprastha* or forest dweller. For the most part the Epic ṛṣis are not lonely wanderers or *saṃnyāsins*, but residents of *āśramas* which are to be found in the deep forest, on the banks of holy rivers or on distant mountains, especially the Himālayas, where they may reside with other ṛṣis, or with their wives or even their children.² There, too, they are frequently described as studying and reciting the *Vedas*, and as performing the required Vedic sacrifices, especially the daily fires, and other orthodox ritual observances.³ As required in the orthodox texts, they do their best to practise sexual abstinence, to eat only the fruits and roots of the forest, to only wear bark, deerskins and other forest products, and to be

1) See *Çāntiparvan*, 327.61-66.

2) e.g. *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 61.57-61; 81.114-115; 94.1; 98.12-17; 110.1-6; 126.5-26; 135.12-15; 145.16-30; 155.89; 190.49; *Çalyaparvan*, 40.1-2.

3) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 100.1-16; 122.27; 126.5-26; 135.12-15; 145.23-30; 287.4-5; *Çalyaparvan*, 35.12; 35.22; 50.39-49.

virtuous, non-violent and disciplined in behaviour, and they also act as teachers or *gurus* with one or more students.¹ Their principal preoccupation is the practice of *tapas* as a way of overcoming desire, attachment and all false conceptions of self, preparatory to the attainment of Heaven. All in all their lifestyle and purpose are far more consistent with the orthodox view of the *vanaprastha* than with the orthodox conception of the lonely *saṃnyāsin*. By contrast, the *saṃnyāsin*, having achieved self-control, renounces all remaining human contact, possessions, and formal religious observances, and wanders alone from place to place, free of desire, indifferent to all worldly concerns including life and death itself, contemplating only the highest reality. Even the need to perform *tapas* is no longer necessary, for the *saṃnyāsin* has already acquired the end the *vanaprastha* seeks.² We shall see, too, that our *pravṛtti* *rṣis* are often remarkably short of self-control and freedom from desire. As well, they frequently issue forth from their *āśramas* to attend to some worldly concern or problem in every day society, rather in the fashion of the peripatetic Vedic sacrificial specialists.

All too often the word *tapas* is freely, but inaccurately, rendered as austerity or self-mortification. But it must always be remembered that the fundamental idea conveyed by the word is that of the inward heating of oneself through the performance of various religious and ascetic practices. Such practices might involve the performance of sacrifice, study of the *Vedas* and other sacred literature, religious pilgrimage and ritual bathing, chanting of hymns and recitation of sacred literature, offering hospitality, meditation, the worship of deities, and so on - activities which the *rṣis* freely indulge in. The emphasis is not on what is done, but the way in which it is done. If done with

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 61.58-60; 145.23-30; 287.4-5; *Udyogaparvan*, 100.6.

2) P.V. Kane provides the best account of the orthodox requirements for the *vanaprastha* and *saṃnyāsa āśramas*. P.V. Kane, *A History of Dharmācāstra*, vol.1, pt.2, pp.917-75.

the appropriate inner fervour, all these practices had the potential for enabling the performer to boost his or her inner store of heat.

On one occasion, for instance, the Seven Ṛṣis journeyed to the Himālayas in search of food, leaving behind their wives. But as a terrible drought, lasting for 12 years, took place the ṛṣis chose to reside in the Himālayas, while Arundhatī, the wife of Vasiṣṭha, devoted herself to *tapas*. Īiva became pleased with her, and assuming the guise of a brahmin he came there begging for hospitality. So for the next 12 years Arundhatī, without eating herself, cooked jujubes for the guest, the only food she had, all the time listening to his sacred discourses. When the Seven Ṛṣis returned at the end of the drought, Īiva assumed his divine form and pronounced that the merit of Arundhatī's *tapas* in performing this act was superior to the *tapas* they had acquired in the Himālayas.¹ In this myth, Arundhatī's inner heat is generated not so much through austerities as through her inner fervour and devotion towards the disguised Īiva.

Nevertheless, perhaps in the *Mahābhārata* more so than most texts it is by awesome feats of self-mortification that the inner store of mystical heat is most effectively built up.² These severe feats could include standing on one leg, keeping the arms raised above the head until they became atrophied and withered (*ūrdhva-bāhu*), observing the five fires in summer (*pañcatapas*) by the lighting of four fires around the body with the scorching summer sun as the fifth, standing in water or wet clothing during the winter, emaciating the body with stern fasts, and remaining in the open during the rainy season.³ But the

1) Ālyaparvan, 47.30-51..

2) The ascetic practices performed are in many respects similar to the austerities undertaken by ascetics in various other traditions such as the Christian 'desert Fathers' in Egypt and Syria, and the Islamic Sufis. See 'Ascetism' in Hastings, *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.73-79, 99-105. Eliade quite plausibly connects the Indian ṛṣi with the shaman, a religious specialist who appears in many cultures, but especially in central and north Asia. M. Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp.375-427.

3) For useful accounts of ascetic practices, see H.P. Chakraborti, *Ascetism in Ancient India (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Ājīvika ascetics)*, pp.138-41;

ascetic practice which receives the most attention in the *Mahābhārata* is the sublimation of sexuality.

The practice of *brahmacarya* was of great importance because of the not unnatural belief that the male seed was a potent form of power.¹ Therefore to waste seed in mere sexual pleasure was to lose power, while to keep 'the seed drawn upwards' (*ūrdhvaretas*) enabled the concentration of heat and energy for spiritual salvation.² Self-controlled, with his seed drawn up (*dāntānāmūrdhvaretasām*) the *brahmacārīn* was said to be a burning fire (*brāhmaṇo hyagnirucyate*).³ However, the mythology has set a pretty problem for our *ṛṣis*, for it will be recalled that in the cosmogonic myths the original *ṛṣis* were expressly created by Brahmā to be *prajāpatīs* or lords of creation so as to continue and expand the creative process.

In the Vedic literature, where *tapas* was as much the heat of sexuality and biological generation as it was the heat of ascetism, the potential for conflict was perhaps less severe. By the time of the Epics, though, the pendulum had swung more towards *tapas* as the heat of ascetism, with a consequent hardening of the contradiction between the outward creative and inward spiritual dimensions of *tapas*.

For the *ṛṣis* the contradiction manifests itself in various ways, but is especially evident in their married lives. Now most of the Epic *ṛṣis* do marry, though the principal motive is to beget children, and not to obtain wives for their own sake or to enjoy sexual pleasure.⁴ Thus Agastya and Jaratkāru both

M.G. Bhagat, *Ancient Indian Ascetism*, pp.204-208; J.C. Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India*, pp.7-35; A.S. Geden, 'Ascetism (Hindu)', in Hastings, *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.87-96.

1) A belief that remains important. See G. Morris Carstairs, *The Twice-Born*, pp.77-88,

2) For the merits of *brahmacarya* compare *Anuśāsanaparvan*, 74.34-37.

3) *Ibid.*, 74.35-36.

4) Note that when Lopāmudrā asks Agastya for a little more romance in their love-making, she prefaces it with the comment: 'No doubt a husband acquires a wife for the sake of children.' (*Aśaṃcayam prajāhetorbhāryām*

take wives, but only after being specifically requested by their Ancestors to continue the lineage; and Jaratkāru sets considerable difficulties to his compliance and abandons his wife only too readily after the seed is planted.¹ In some cases the wife of a *ṛṣi* supported her husband's ascetic habits and even became an adept at *tapas* herself, just as Arundhatī did.² But in other instances, the possession of a wife led to marital conflict over sex, with the *ṛṣi*'s angry loss of self-control entailing a loss of *tapas*. For instance, when Jamadagni Bhārgava's wife Reṇukā saw Citraratha, the king of the *gandharvas* sporting in the water with his wives, she felt a sudden rush of desire. But the powerful Jamadagni perceived her slight lapse from wifely chastity and angrily he ordered his eldest three sons to kill their mother, and cursed them to lose their minds when they did not. Rāma, the youngest, heeded his father's command and with an axe he cut off his mother's head. When his fury had subsided, Jamadagni offered his obedient son boons, whereupon Rāma chose that his mother be restored to life and his brothers to normality.³ There was also conflict between Gautama and his wife Ahalyā after the lustful Indra had taken the form of the *ṛṣi* himself to deceive her into sexual intercourse. Gautama irately cursed the king of gods to lose his *liṅga*;⁴ but in another version Gautama angrily ordered his son Cirakārin ('slow-doer') to kill his mother, and then went to the forest to practise *yoga*. Once in the forest the *ṛṣi* soon repented, and on hurriedly returning was relieved to find his son still contemplating the respective obligations owed to his father and mother.⁵ In another myth the

patiravindata) Āraṇyakaparvan, 95.16. Occasionally, however, a *ṛṣi* is said to fall in love (e.g. Nārada falls in love with Sukumārī of peerless beauty. Āntiparvan, 30.4-22), or to find erotic pleasure with his wife (e.g. Ṛcika Bhārgava, Āraṇyakaparvan, 115.18), or more commonly with a female who is not his wife (e.g. Parāçara, Ādiparvan, 57.55-66; and Vyāsa, Ādiparvan, 100.22-26.)

- 1) For the tale of Jaratkāru, Ādiparvan, 13.9-34, Ādiparvan, 41-43; for the tale of Agastya, Āraṇyakaparvan, 94.11-15.
- 2) e.g. Lopāmudrā, Āraṇyakaparvan, 95.10-13; Reṇukā, Āraṇyakaparvan, 116.3; and Sukanyā, Āraṇyakaparvan, 122.26.
- 3) Āraṇyakaparvan, 116.7-18.
- 4) Āntiparvan, 329.14; Anuçāsanaparvan, 138.6.
- 5) Āntiparvan, 258.7-59.

Seven Ṛṣis abandoned their wives on the mere - and false as it proved - suspicion of unfaithfulness. On this occasion, Fire or Agni espied the wives of the Seven Ṛṣis as they bathed, and although he fell to the power of lust he contained himself, for they were the wives of eminent brahmins. Now Svāhā, the daughter of Dakṣa, had herself been in love with Agni, and perceiving his desire she assumed the form of each of the wives (save the faithful Arundhatī whose *tapas* was too strong) and in that way satisfied Agni's craving and her own. Svāhā cast Agni's seed into a lake and there it gathered together to form Skanda. However, hearing rumours of their wives' unfaithfulness and of the birth of Skanda, the ṛṣis abandoned the six wives, despite assurances from Viṣvāmitra who had witnessed all that Svāhā had done.¹ It is noteworthy, too, that even Arundhatī's faithfulness and devotion to *tapas* did not save her from marital discord. According to one myth Arundhatī once doubted her husband Vasiṣṭha and because of that she became only a tiny and not always visible star in the sky.² It would seem that, one way or another, *brahmacarya* was the most important but the most difficult of all the ascetic practices. And, as we shall see, it was a weak point which the gods were to exploit when a ṛṣi's amassment of fiery energy threatened not just the order of the triple-world but the divine supremacy itself.

From the religious point of view, the rationale behind self-torture was to conquer desire, anger and worldly attachments of all sorts, to destroy the false conception of a personal self (*ahaṃkāra*), and so to cultivate the inner-heat and energy of the body. With the body completely subdued, all its heat and energies could be directed inwards, thus enabling the concentration of the mental processes and their direction towards spiritual salvation. In some myths the ṛṣis stand so still and concentrated in the performance of their *tapas* that they appear to be inanimate objects or part of their surroundings. Perhaps the most

1) Aranyakaparvan, 213.43 - 215.12.

2) Ādiparvan, 224.27-29..

striking examples of this in the *Mahābhārata* concern the Bhārgava seer Cyavana. In one myth Cyavana stood rigidly still for so long performing *tapas* that he became an anthill covered with creepers.¹ As if this were not enough, in another myth Cyavana became desirous of performing the vow of *udavāsa*, 'staying in the water', at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā. After standing there like a post for a very long time he became covered with moss and river life, and was accidentally netted by a group of fishermen.²

The exertions and efforts, arduous though they might be, that the *rṣis* make for religious salvation do seem to pay off, for at various points they are said to attain Heaven.³ However, the power of *tapas* could as readily be used for worldly purposes as spiritual, and in the *Mahābhārata* much more attention is devoted to the former. It was well accepted at the time that the cultivation of *tapas*, even if purely for religious ends, brought with it the acquisition of various miraculous powers such as the power of becoming invisible, walking on water, flying through the air, remembering previous existences, reading the thoughts of others, telling the past and future, and entering the body of another.⁴ Although the Epic *rṣis* exhibit many of these powers or *siddhis*, such feats are comparatively trivial when compared to the uses their amassed *tapas* could be put to. And, in conformity with the true nature of heat, the uses, whether directed at the natural world, or at fellow mortals or celestials, could be both constructive and destructive.

From the myths and discourses in the Epic it is evident that the *rṣis*, through their *tapas*, possessed the power to control the natural processes and cycles of the triple-world. In some myths the fire of their *tapas* is considered so great that the *rṣis* are even capable of taking the place of the sun and

1) Aranyakaparvan, 122.1-3.

2) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 50.1-20. Compare Udyogaparvan, 104.8-18 where Viṣvāmitra stands as rigid as a post for 100 years subsisting only on the wind.

3) e.g. Anuṣāsanaparvan, 94-95.

4) See M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, pp.102-3, 135-6; Mitchiner, *op.cit.*, p.207.

moon, bringing light to the triple-world. According to one myth, related by Mārkaṇḍeya, Agni once went in anger to the woods to perform *tapas*, whereupon the ṛṣi Aṅgiras himself became Agni, heating and illuminating the worlds with his inner-glow as he dwelt in his āśrama. Now Agni became 'greatly vexed with the splendour of the other ascetic' and thought to himself: 'Brahmā has brought into being here another Fire God of the worlds, for my fiery state has disappeared while I was practising *tapas*. How shall I become the Fire God again?' Then, beholding the great *muni* who was 'glowing like fire itself' he approached slowly and fearfully, but Aṅgiras bade him to resume his old position as the God of Fire, dispeller of the night, and prosperer of the worlds.² In similar fashion it is related how the gods and demons once fought, and Svarbhānu pierced the sun and moon with his arrows. Swallowed by the darkness, the gods were overcome by the powerful *dānavas*. Then seeing the sage (*vipra*) Atri, they pleaded for rescue from their fear: 'Become the Moon; and also become the Sun, dispelling the darkness and destroying the demons for us.'³ Then through the power of his *tapas* (*tapasā svena saṃyuge*) Atri began to shine forth (*prakāṣamakarod*), dispelling the darkness of the world, and burning (*dahyamānān*) the great demons. The gods then struck down their enemies.⁴ Often, too, the heat and brilliance of the ṛṣis is compared to that of the sun or Agni. When the ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha ascended to the heavens to ask the Sun for his daughter Tapatī for the love-struck Saṃvaraṇa, he is described as himself having the brilliance of the sun.⁵ And his arch rival Viśvāmitra is said to have performed *tapas* to such a degree that he became like the sun with his heat.⁶ Rāma Jāmadagnya is also said to blaze like fire (*jvalantamiva*

1) Atha saṃcintayāmāsa bhagavānhavyavāhanah/
Anyo agniriha lokānām brahmaṇā saṃpravartitah/
Agnitvaṃ vipranaṣṭaṃ hi tapyamānasya me tapaḥ// Āraṇyakaparvan, 207.10.

2) *Ibid.*, 207.6-17. Compare Ādiparvan, 114.41 where the ṛṣi Atri is said to be the moon or 'he who rises as the sun goes down.'

3) ...candramā bhava/ Timiraghnaṣṭa savitā dasyuhā caiva no bhava// Anuṣāsana parvan, 141.7. 4) *Ibid.*, 141.1-11. 5) Ādiparvan, 162.10-18..

6) Tejasā bhāskarākāro gādhijah samapadyata// Ālyaparvan, 39.26.

pāvakam).¹

In another myth it is related how Kaçyapa supported and maintained the functioning of the earth itself. Once the king of Aṅga proposed to give away the entire earth as a sacrificial fee to the brahmins. Apprehensive and aggrieved, the goddess Earth abandoned her nature as the soil (*tyaktvā ... bhūmitvaṃ*) and complained to Brahmā. Seeing the goddess depart, Kaçyapa immediately freed himself of his own body and entered the earth itself. While Kaçyapa pervaded the earth in this way for 300,000 years, plant life flourished, fears disappeared and *dharma* was foremost.²

Besides warming and illuminating the worlds with their own inner heat, the ṛṣis possessed the power to change or even reverse the normal processes of life itself. Thus the seer Gautama, pleased with the conduct and devotion of his now aged pupil Uttanika, transformed him into a youth of 16 and presented his daughter as a wife.³ And, as we have seen, Jamadagni restored his slain wife Reṇukā to life at the behest of Rāma.⁴ In another story it is related how a Haihaya prince on a hunt mistook a hermit (*muni*) wearing a black antelope skin for a deer and accidentally slew him. But the sage, endowed with the power of *tapas* (*tapobalasamanvitaḥ*) resurrected himself.⁵ When King Srñjaya requests from the ṛṣi Parvata the boon of a son the like of the king of gods, Indra became fearful of humiliation and had the young prince slain by a tiger. But the ṛṣi Nārada restored the boy to life,⁶ and he became a renowned ruler.

In these instances, the power of the ṛṣi was sufficient to restore life. In yet another myth, Vasiṣṭha's power of *tapas* was such that he found he could not even take his own life! Grief-filled at the death of his 100 sons, a catastrophe engineered by his arch-enemy Viçvāmitra, the ṛṣi determined on suicide. First Vasiṣṭha threw himself from the top of Mount Meru but the earth gently caught

1) Udyogaparvan, 176.23.

3) Āçvamedhikaparvan, 55.1-26.

5) *Ibid.*, 182.1-15.

2) Anuçāsanaparvan, 139.1-8.

4) Āraṇyakaparvan, 116.1-18.

6) Çāntiparvan, 31.15-41.

him. Then he entered a huge fire, but the flames of the fire turned cold. After unsuccessfully trying to drown himself in the ocean, he finally plunged into a crocodile filled torrent, but the river thought he was like Agni or Fire, and fled in one hundred directions (and hence was called Çatadru). Vasiṣṭha finally concluded he could not die.¹

While the *ṛṣis* begot children as other creatures do, they also exhibited the ability to overcome the normal methods of biological generation, so great was the potency of their inner heat. In one myth it is related that Kaçyapa, whose soul was purified through *tapas* (*tapasā bhāvitātmanah*), went to a lake to perform more *tapas*. For a long time he exhausted himself with *tapas*, but while bathing in the water, he saw the *apsarās* Urvaçī whereupon his seed burst forth (*tasya retah pracaskanda*). Then a thirsty doe drank the seed up with water and became pregnant. In time the doe gave birth to a great seer, and as there was an antelope-horn on his head, he was called Rçyaçrñga.²

Once, too, while Vyāsa was rubbing his fire-sticks together, he saw the *apsarās* Ghṛtācī who, with her lustre, was very beautiful. Vyāsa suddenly became overcome by desire. Seeing his emotion the *apsarās* took the form of a parrot, but despite his best efforts at regaining his composure and self-control Vyāsa's seed fell out, and from that seed was born a son called Çuka because of the manner of his birth.³

In another myth, the seer Bharadvāja, of great *tapas*, journeyed to the Gaṅgā to bathe, and there he too saw the *apsarās* Ghṛtācī fresh from bathing. But 'As she was standing on the river bank, the wind blew her skirt askew: the seer saw her nude and desired her. His heart cleaving to her, the seer, who had been a virgin from childhood, spilled forth his seed excitedly, and he placed it in a

1) Ādiparvan, 166.40-45, 167.1-10.

2) Āraṇyakaparvan, 110.1-17.

3) Çāntiparvan, 311.1-9.

trough.¹ From the trough Droṇa was born.² In a variant version Bharadvāja lost his seed at the mere sight of the large-eyed Ghṛtācī. Catching it in his hand, the ascetic then placed it in a cup made of leaves, and in that container was born a girl called Srucāvati.³ Another ascetic casualty of sudden desire was the great sage Mañkaṇaka who had always led the life of a *brahmacārīn*. One day while performing his ablutions in the river he saw a comely maid bathing nude there. At this the ṛṣi lost his seed in the water. Thereupon Mañkaṇaka placed his potent seed in his earthen pot where it divided into seven parts, and in due time seven ṛṣis were born.⁴

Various ṛṣis also used their unusual powers to obtain sons for mortals, especially kings. Having granted the boon of sons, the ṛṣi Rcīka Bhārgava prescribed for his wife Satyavatī and her mother, the wife of King Gādhi, a course of ritual bathing, embracing certain types of trees and the consumption of a specially prepared *caru* (sacrificial food of milk and rice) - after which the king's wife gave birth to Viṣvāmitra and Satyavatī to Jamadagni.⁵

In all this the original connection between *tapas* and potent fertility is as manifest as the later concern with *tapas* and religious salvation. Admittedly the seers do often succumb to sexual desire and direct their *tapas* outwards rather than inwards, but through asexual procreation they can at least escape female entrapment.

Besides their mastery of the natural world, *tapas* also gave the ṛṣis mastery of their fellow mortals. Normally the ṛṣis exercised their power through the devices of the boon, curse, and occasionally the sacrifice; though in the latter case it would seem to have been the seers *tapas* and not the power of

1) Tasyā vāyurnadītīre vasanaṃ vyaharattadā/
 Apakṛṣṭāmbarāṃ drṣṭvā tāmṛṣiṣṭakame tatah//
 Tasyāṃ saṃsaktamanasaḥ kaumārabrahmacārīṇaḥ/
 Hr̥ṣṭasya retaścaskanda tadṛṣirdroṇa ādadhe// Ādiparvan, 154.3-4.

2) See *ibid.*, 154.1-5; also Ādiparvan, 121.3-5.

3) Čalyaparvan, 47.57-60.

4) *Ibid.*, 37.29-32.

5) Āraṇyakaparvan, 115.9-30; Čāntiparvan, 49.1-28; Anuṣāsanaparvan, 4.1-48.

the sacrifice that was effective.

Despite normally being depicted as forest dwellers, the *rṣis* often use their *tapas* to assist mortal society, and more especially kings. Sometimes they are said to have acted as *purohitas* in which role they performed all of the sacrifices, rites and ceremonies necessary at the court of the king. Thus was Aṅgiras said to have acted as *purohita* for King Karandhara.¹ As *purohita*, the *rṣi* could also help destroy the enemies of the king. When King Mucukunda had conquered the entire earth he chose to test his strength against Vaiṣṛavaṇa (Kubera) himself. Now Vaiṣṛavaṇa created a large army of *rākṣasas* which smote the king's forces. The king then reproved his *purohita* Vasiṣṭha, who, after performing severe *tapas* (*ugraṁ tapastaptvā*), repelled the *rākṣasas*.² Elsewhere Vasiṣṭha is said to have rescued the Bhārata lineage when their fortunes were at a particularly low point by accepting the deposed king Saṁvaraṇa's invitation to be his *purohita*. Saṁvaraṇa was quickly restored to his throne and the Bhāratas again flourished.³ As well, the kings of Ikṣvāku's line conquered the earth after obtaining Vasiṣṭha as their *purohita*.⁴ When king Divodāsa was defeated by the Vaitahavyas he sought protection at the *āṣrama* of the *rṣi* Bharadvāja. The *rṣi* performed a sacrifice to beget for the king a son called Pratardana. Through his *yoga* power, Bharadvāja entered the body of the prince enabling him to slay his enemies.⁵

The *rṣis* also used their *tapas* to protect kings in danger. For instance, when Paraçurāma was destroying the *kṣatriyas* twenty-one times over, the *rṣi* Parāçara protected the son of Saudāsa, while the *rṣi* Gautama protected Brhadratha.⁶ At the end of his slaughter, Rāma performed a Horse-Sacrifice in which he gave away the earth to Kaçyapa, who promptly banished him to the shore

1) Āçvamedhikaparvan, 4.22, 5.7-8. The brahmin seer Raibhya and his sons also serve as sacrificial priests to King Brhaddyumna. Āraṇyakaparvan, 139.1-2.

2) See Çāntiparvan, 75.3-13.

3) Ādiparvan, 89.31-42.

4) *Ibid.*, 164.9-10.

5) Anuçāsanaparvan, 31.6-41.

6) Çāntiparvan, 49.68-69 & 72-73.

of the southern ocean. As the earth, shorn of its kings, sank into anarchy, Kaçyapa consecrated as kings those *kṣatriyas* who had survived.¹ The *ṛṣi* Bhṛgu also protected King Vitahavya when he was hotly pursued by King Pratardana, and by the power of his speech alone raised him to the status of a brahmin.²

Relations between *ṛṣis* and rulers were not always to be so harmonious and advantageous. Any irreverence or offence against a *ṛṣi*, be it personal or ritual, would normally be repaid with a fiery reaction. Perhaps the most notable example in the *Mahābhārata* is when the great Agastya hurled King Nahuṣa from heaven and cursed him to be a snake on earth for having kicked him on the head with his left foot.³ In the myths concerning King Arjuna Kārtavīrya, the king (or alternatively his powerful and cruel sons) devastated the *āçrama* of Jamadagni and stole the calf of the seer's *homadhenu* or sacrificial cow. Filled with fury, Jamadagni's mighty son regained the calf and cut off King Arjuna's 1,000 arms. In turn King Arjuna's sons, maddened by Rāma's deed, slew the great *ṛṣi* Jamadagni while Rāma was absent. Swearing vengeance, Rāma resolved to massacre all *kṣatriyas*, beginning with King Arjuna's sons.⁴ Similarly, when Viçvāmitra, then king of Kānyakubja, tried to drag away Vasiṣṭha's *kāmadhenu* ('wish-granting cow') while on a visit to the seer's *āçrama*, Vasiṣṭha created demons and warriors from the cow's body and destroyed the king's army.⁵ While a fiery curse is not directly involved in these accounts, they do vividly illustrate the destructive power a *ṛṣi* could bring to bear upon mortals, or more accurately *kṣatriyas*. As well, when King Vidarbha is reluctant to bestow his daughter Lopāmudrā on Agastya, it is fear of being burnt with the fire of the *ṛṣi*'s curse (*çāpāgninā dahet*) that decides him.⁶ The brahmin seer Vāmadeva also uses

1) *Ibid.*, 49.56-79.

2) *Anuçāsanaparvan*, 31.31-54.

3) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 176.11-24, 177.5-10, 178.30-41; *Udyogaparvan*, 17.1-17; *Anuçāsanaparvan*, 102.1-29, 103.1-36.

4) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 116.20-29, 117.1-11, *Çāntiparvan*, 49.34-56.

5) *Ādiparvan*, 165.1-44, *Çalyaparvan*, 39.12-22.

6) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 95.1-4.

the power of his *tapas* to cut down the kings Çala, Bala and Dala when they refuse to return his misappropriated horses.¹ All in all, relations between *ṛṣis* and *kṣatriyas* demonstrated a considerable degree of ambivalence.

Tapas also gives the *ṛṣis* the power to lord it over the gods if they so chose, a fact which considerably complicates their relationship. Save for the unusual case of the Bhārgava *ṛṣi* Çukra, who served as priest to the *asuras*, the Epic *ṛṣis* invariably support the gods in their eternal struggle with the demons; and often they are instrumental in getting the gods out of a tight scrape. But such help is inevitably ambivalent, for it demonstrates the total mastery of the *ṛṣis* and demeans the status of the gods.

This is well illustrated in the extraordinary tale of Agastya and the terrible Kāleyas, a group of demons who guarded Vṛtra as he covered over heaven and earth. Now when Indra (made mighty by the *tejas* or energy of Viṣṇu), the other gods and the brahmin *ṛṣis*, finally managed to slay Vṛtra, the panic-stricken Kāleyas plotted to weaken the gods by destroying all religious life on earth. Sorely afflicted because of the devastation upon earth, Indra and the gods sought the protection of Nārāyaṇa, the creator, protector and maintainer of the worlds. Nārāyaṇa explained that the gods could not kill the Kāleyas while they sheltered in Varuṇa's abode, therefore they must first destroy the ocean. And who but Agastya, Viṣṇu added, was capable of drying up the ocean. The gods repaired to Agastya's āçrama where they found the great *ṛṣi*, a mass of *tapas* (*taporāçīm*), and ablaze with *tejas* (*dīptatejasam*); and they beseeched him: 'Blessed Lord, when we are frightened by danger, you are always a refuge. Therefore, tormented (as we are) we implore you for a boon, for you are a granter of boons.'² Agastya agreed to the boon they sought - that he should drink up the ocean. So accompanied by gods, seers, men, snakes, *gandharvas* and

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 190.49-82; cf. Anuçāsanaparvan, 33.7-8.

2) Asmākaṃ bhayabhītānāṃ nityaço bhagavāṅgatiḥ/

Tatastvārtāḥ prayācāmastvāṃ varaṃ varado hyasi// Āraṇyakaparvan, 101.17.

so on, Agastya proceeded to the ocean shore where he angrily drank up the ocean (*samudramapibatkruddhaḥ*).¹ Supremely astonished (*vismayaṃ paramaṃ*), Indra and the gods gave praise: 'Through your grace the universe and the immortals will not go to destruction!'² The gods took up their weapons and fell upon the demons. But when the victorious gods requested Agastya to fill up the ocean again, to their amazement and despair (*vismitāṇṇa viṣaṇṇāṇṇa*), he merely replied: 'Think of another method to fill the ocean for I have digested that water. Make an effort.'³

According to another myth, the gods were once defeated by the demons who then took away their sacrifices and stopped all religious rites and sacrifices amongst mortals. Their lordship lost, the gods wandered upon the earth. Then one day they saw Agastya who, with his *tejas*, blazed with the brilliance of the Sun (*dīptamādityavarcaṣaṃ*). The gods appealed to the *ṛṣi* to rescue them from this great peril. Agastya was enraged by the plight of the gods and, 'full of *tejas*, he blazed forth like the fire of Time at the universal destruction'⁴ and those 'dānavas were burnt up by his mass of burning rays' (*tena dīptāṇṇaṇṇa nirdagdha dānavāḥ*). Resuming their own worlds again, the gods then beseeched the *ṛṣi* to also destroy those demons who had taken shelter within the earth. However, Agastya indicated he had already expended sufficient of his precious *tapas* in the god's cause. If he burnt those *dānavas*, his *tapas* would decrease (*tapo hi kṣīyante*).⁵ As well, while Indra and the gods debated much on how to free themselves from the tyrannous rule of their mortal king Nahuṣa, Agastya (or Bhṛgu in one version) solved the problem by cursing the king to be born on

1) *Ibid.*, 103.3.

2) *Tvatprasādātsamucchedaṃ na gacchetsāmaram jagat*// *ibid.*, 103.5.

3) *Jīrṇaṃ taddhī mayā toyamupāyo anyāḥ pracintyatām/ Pūraṇārthaṃ samudrasya bhavadbhīryatnamāsthitaḥ*// *ibid.*, 103.16; see 98.1 - 103.17. In the *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, Aṅgīras, through his *tejas*, drank up the ocean and still remained thirsty. In this case, at least, he did fill the ocean again.

Anuṣāsanaparvan, 138.3-4.

4) *Prajaṇvāla ca tejasvī kālāgniriva saṃkṣaye*// *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 140.7.

5) *Ibid.*, 140.1-12.

earth as a snake after he had kicked the seer on the head with his left foot.¹

On another occasion it is Vasiṣṭha who rescued the gods. Once a race of demons called Khalin, seeing the gods emaciated as they underwent a sacrificial consecration (*dīkṣā*), desired to slay them. To make matters worse Brahmā had bestowed on the demons the boon that any demon slain would return to life when plunged into the waters of Lake Mānasa. Sorely afflicted the gods first went to Indra for refuge, and when Indra fared no better he sought the protection of Vasiṣṭha. Effortlessly the ṛṣi burnt all those demons with his *tejas*, before bringing the river Gaṅgā there to sunder the life-restoring lake.²

In many other myths, however, the ṛṣis threaten or even curse various gods. For instance, the enraged ṛṣi Bhṛgu cursed Agni, the divine carrier of oblations, to eat anything for revealing to the love-crazed *rākṣasa* Puloman the identity of his dear wife Pulomā. The outraged Agni then brought an end to religious rites on earth by withdrawing from all sacrifices. The gods appealed to Brahmā who asked Agni to accept the curse while pointing out that anything burned by his flames would be purified.³ Presumably not even Brahmā was prepared to or even capable of over-riding the curse of a ṛṣi. In the *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, Agni, the God of Fire himself, trembles in fear at the prospect of being burnt by the fiery powers of the brahmin seer Saṃvarta, the elder brother of the divine priest Brhaspati.⁴

In another myth it was Agastya who cursed the god Kubera that his army of dread *yakṣas*, along with his *rākṣasa* friend Manimat, would meet destruction at the hands of a human. Once Kubera set off to a meeting of the gods with a horde of his *yakṣas*. On the way they passed over the top of Agastya, that

1) See Udyogaparvan, 11-17.

2) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 140.15-25.

3) Ādiparvan, 5.11 - 7.25. Compare Çalyaparvan, 46.12-20 where Agni, afraid of Bhṛgu's curse to be omniverous, hid himself in the *çamī* wood until the gods sought him out.

4) Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 9.1-37.

foremost of ṛṣis, who was performing dreadful *tapas* (*ugram tapastapasyantam*). Standing there, with his arms upraised, facing the sun, he was a mass of burning energy (*tejorāṇim*), blazing like a well-fueled fire (*dīpyamānam hutāṇamivaidhitam*). The sight was too much for Kubera's good friend Maṇimat, the lord of the *rākṣasas*, who out of stupidity, ignorance, wantonness and folly, spat upon (*nyaṣṭhivad*) the head of the great seer from the sky. Enraged as though burning all the quarters (*dīṇaḥ sarvā dahanniva*), Agastya reviled the 'evil-minded' (*durmate*) Kubera and cursed that Maṇimat and these troops would meet with destruction from a human, whereupon Kubera himself would be free of sin.¹ The curse was duly fulfilled by that formidable destroyer of *rākṣasas* and *yakṣas*, Bhīmasena, whose own behaviour was not always that different.

The Vasus, too, are cursed by Vasiṣṭha to be born among men for foolishly (*vimūḍhās*) they had come too close to Vasiṣṭha as he sat hidden at his twilight devotions.² Where in this account the Vasus are inadvertently at fault, in a variant version they wilfully offend, for at the urging of the wife of Dyaus they steal Vasiṣṭha's wondrous sacrificial milk cow which yielded all desires. Vasiṣṭha, at least, put a limit of one year on his curse for all the Vasus save Dyaus, who is born amongst men as Bhīṣma.³

Utathya, born in the lineage of Aṅgiras, also turns his *tapas* on Varuṇa after the God of Waters had abducted and ravished his wife Bhadrā, the daughter of Soma, who was unequalled in her beauty. When Varuṇa refused to return her, the enraged Utathya, who was a mighty performer of *tapas* (*sumahātāpāḥ*), drank up the waters with his *tejas* (*apibattejasā*). When Varuṇa still refused, Utathya dried up all the water on the land, by which time Varuṇa conceded defeat. With his wife returned, the seer cheerfully returned the waters.⁴

Perhaps the most unusual instance of a seer cursing a god is when Māṇḍavya

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 158.46-58.

3) *Ibid.*, 93.1-45.

2) *Ādiparvan*, 91.12-13.

4) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 139.9-30.

curses the god Dharma for overdoing karmic retribution. Once the great brahmin ascetic and *yogin* stood below a tree at the entrance to his *ācrama* observing a vow of silence. As he did so a band of hotly pursued *dasyus* entered his *ācrama* and hid there with their booty. When the pursuing guards arrived they asked Māṇḍavya which way the robbers had gone, but the ascetic of course gave no reply. Finding the thieves and their plunder in his *ācrama*, the guards suspected Māṇḍavya himself and took him before the king with the robbers. All were condemned to be impaled on the stake. Māṇḍavya, however, did not die and when the king came to know who he was, he sought his forgiveness which was granted. But the king could not pull the stake out of the ascetic so he cut it off at the end. Thereupon the hermit (*munī*) wandered with the stake still inside and through this form of *tapas* he conquered worlds that were hard to attain. When Māṇḍavya went to the abode of the god Dharma he reproached him: 'Now then, what evil deed did I unknowingly commit that I incurred the production of such consequences. Quickly, tell me the truth. Behold the power of my *tapas*!' Dharma explained that the ascetic (*tapodhana*) had once stuck reeds into the tails of little birds. Not satisfied, Māṇḍavya replied: 'As the sin was small, (and) the punishment you fixed for me vast, you, O Dharma, will be born a man from the womb of a *çūdra*.'² Thus was Vidura born on earth.

However, it is the arrogant and prideful king of gods who is most frequently humiliated at the hands of the Epic's *ṛṣis*. Thus, after the Aṅvins had changed the aged Cyavana into a handsome youth again,³ the *ṛṣi* guaranteed that they would drink *soma* in front of Indra himself. So, when King

1) Kiṃ nu tadduṣkṛtaṃ karma mayā kṛtamajānatā/
Yasyeyaṃ phalanirvṛttiridrçyāsāditā mayā/
Çighramācakṣva me tattvaṃ paçya me tapaso balam// Ādiparvan, 101.23.

2) Alpe aparādhe vipulo mama daṇḍastvayā kṛtaḥ/
Çūdrayonāvato dharma mānuṣaḥ sambhaviṣyasi// *ibid.*, 101.25. See 101.1-25.
Compare *ibid.* 57.77-81.,

3) For a history of the Cyavana legend see E.W. Hopkins, 'The Fountain of Youth', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.xxvi (1905), pp.48-56.

Çaryāti, Cyavana's father-in-law, held a sacrifice to celebrate this marvel, the ṛṣi honoured his promise by drawing *soma* for the Aṣvins. But the king of gods strenuously objected for as physicians and servants to the gods they were of lowly divine status; and as they freely consorted with mortals they were of dubious purity. When Cyavana ignored Indra's repeated protestations and poured the *soma*, the king of gods readied to hurl his dread thunderbolt. Immediately Cyavana paralysed his arm and, intent upon sorcery (*kṛtyārthī*), he offered into the sacrificial fire with the proper *mantras*, for he was prepared to injure the god (*devaṃ hīṇsitumudyataḥ*).¹ Then, by the power of his *tapas* (*tapobalāt*), that sorcery became a gigantic and horrendous *asura* named Mada who looked as if he would forcibly devour the world (*grasanniva jagadbalāt*).² As that furious *asura* readied to eat up the king of gods, the fear afflicted (*bhayapīḍitaḥ*) Indra hurriedly decided he would after all drink *soma* with the Aṣvins. Henceforth the Aṣvins partook of *soma*.³ Although Cyavana had created the terrible demon out of the sacrifice, the power comes from the seer's *tapas*, just as it does when Indra's arm is paralysed.

As if this was not bad enough, Indra was to fare even worse in conflicts with other ṛṣis. Thus after Indra had seduced Ahalyā, the wife of Gautama, the ṛṣi desisted from destroying him outright, but cursed him to be covered with a thousand *yonis* or vaginas, subsequently modifying it to a thousand eyes.⁴ In a similar myth, Indra's physical appearance, though not his dignity, escapes rather more lightly. When the seer Devaçarman leaves his student Vipula in charge of his beautiful wife Ruci, he specifically warns him to be on guard against the lustful ways of the king of gods, and the amorous susceptibilities of women. To carry out his duty Vipula, drawing upon his *yoga* power, entered into the body of Ruci and took possession of her. Now Indra, assuming a body of astonishing

1) Āraṇyakaparvan, 124.18.

2) *Ibid.*, 124.23.

3) See *ibid.*, 123.1 - 125.8. Also Anuṣāsanaparvan, 141.15-30.

4) Anuṣāsanaparvan, 41.21, 138.6.

beauty, duly came to the ācrama and directed all his flattery towards the seer's wife. But, much to Indra's surprise and dejection, Ruci did not respond as hoped, for she was restrained by Vipula. With his divine eye Indra soon saw the ascetic (*muni*) within, filled with terrible *tapas* (*ghoreṇa tapasā*); and utterly terrified, fearing the ascetic's curse, Indra trembled (*prāvepata susaṃtrastaḥ śāpabhītaḥ*). Vipula first reviled the king of gods: 'O evil-minded, licentious Puraṇḍara, whose senses are uncontrolled, the gods and mortals will not honour you for long.' And then Vipula suggested that the foolish Indra should be thankful that he did not this very day burn him down with his *tejas*. Ashamed (*vrīḍitaḥ*), Indra disappeared.²

In other myths it is Indra's fickleness as the god of rain that leads to friction with the ṛṣis. Thus it is related that Indra ceased to pour down rain when Agastya undertook a great 12 year sacrifice. Hearing of this Agastya showed virtual contempt for the king of gods, threatening to himself become Indra and so maintain creatures. Seeing the power of the seer's *tapas* (*dr̥ṣtvā tasya tapobalam*) Indra promptly rained down.³ In the story of R̥cyaṣṛṅga, Indra is again forced to break a drought through fear (*bhayād*) of the young ascetic's *tapas*.⁴

Elsewhere the ascetic (*tapasvin*) Yavakrīta, son of Bharadvāja, sorely scorched (*saṃtāpayāmāsa bhr̥ṣaṃ*) the king of gods in his efforts to attain immediate knowledge of the *Vedas*. Although Indra warned him against this attempted short-cut to knowledge of the *Vedas*, he eventually gave way before the ascetic power of *tapas*.⁵

Indeed, Indra's fear of ṛṣis is so great, that at times the mere thought of a ṛṣi busily amassing *tapas* is sufficient to urge him to preemptive action. In

1) Ajitendriya pāpātmankāmātmaka puraṇḍara/

Na ciraṃ pūjayiṣyanti devāstvām mānuṣāstathā// *ibid.*, 41.20.

2) Nāhaṃ tvāmadya mūḍhātmandāheyaṃ hi svatejasā/ *ibid.*, 41.23. See 41.1-27.

3) Āṣvamedhikaparvan, 95.5-33.

4) Āraṇyakaparvan, 110.3.

5) *Ibid.*, 135.12-42.

one myth it is related that Viṣvāmitra performed such powerful *tapas* (*tapyamānaḥ ... mahātapāḥ*) that he greatly burned (*subhr̥ṣaṃ tāpayāmāsa*) Çakra himself, who, his mind atremble (*kampayate manaḥ*), feared that the *r̥ṣi* would deprive him of his position. Indra now summoned the *apsarās* Menakā and bade her to obstruct his *tapas*: 'O you with beautiful hips, excite his desire with your beauty, youth, sweetness, movements, smiles and utterances. Divert his *tapas*.' Overawed by the suggested enterprise, and fully aware of Indra's fainthearted inconsistency, Menakā replied:

The illustrious (seer) has great heat, always has powerful *tapas*, and is wrathful; and you, blessed sir, know this is so. Why should I not fear he whom you fear? ... Command me, O Lord, so his anger will not burn me. He could burn up the worlds with his heat; shake the earth with his feet; and compress mighty Mount Meru and revolve it quickly. Endued with such *tapas*, blazing like a fire - how could a young woman of our kind touch (him) whose senses are conquered? His mouth is a blazing offering fire, the sun and moon are the pupils of his eyes. Time, O best of gods, is his tongue - how could one of our kind touch him? Even Yama, Soma, the great seers, and all the Sādhyas and Vālahkilyas are afraid of him because of his power - why, then, should one like me not be terrified?

Nevertheless, Menakā agreed that she could not but do Çakra's bidding; but added that, by the grace of Indra, when she began to play before the *r̥ṣi* a pleasant breeze should come from the woods, the wind must blow open (*vivṛnotu*) her garment, and Manmatha, the God of Love, must be her assistant in this deed. So be it, said Indra; and so it was. When the wind blew off Menakā's garment,

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- 1) Rūpayauvanamādhuryaceṣṭitasmitabhāṣitadh/
Lobhayitvā varārohe tapasaḥ saṃnivartaya// Ādīparvan, 65.26.
- 2) Mahātejāḥ sa bhagavānsadaiva ca mahātapāḥ/
Kopanaṣca tathā hyenaṃ jñāti bhagavānapi// (27)
Tejasastapasaṣcaiva kopasya ca mahātmanaḥ/
Tvamapyudvijase yasya nodvijeyamahaṃ katham// (28)
Yathā māṃ na dahetkruddhastathājñāpaya māṃ vibho// (35)
Tejasā nirdahellokāṅkampayeddharaṇīm padā/
Saṃkṣipecca mahāmeruṃ tūrṇamāvartayettathā// (36)
Tādṛṣaṃ tapasā yuktaṃ pradīptamiva pāvakaṃ/
Kathamasmadvidhā bālā jitendriyamabhispr̥ṣet// (37)
Hutāṇanamukhaṃ dīptaṃ sūryacandrākṣitārakam/
Kālajihvaṃ suraṣreṣṭha kathamasmadvidhā spr̥ṣet// (38)
Yamaṣca somaṣca maharṣayaṣca
sādhyā viṣve vālahkilyaṣca sarve/
Ete api yasyodvijante prabhāvāt
kasmāttasmānmādr̥ṣī nodvijeta// (39) Ādīparvan, 65.27-39.

revealing her indescribable youth and beauty (*anirdeṣyavayorūpām*), that bull among brahmins (*vīprarṣabhas*) fell to the power of desire, and the two of them enjoyed themselves (*vyaharatām*) in the woods for a very long time.¹

In similar fashion the ṛṣi Çaradvat Gautama, who excelled more in the study of weaponry than the *Vedas*, greatly tormented Indra with his heat (*bhṛṣaṃ saṃtāpayāmāsa*) both because of his skill with weapons and his great *tapas*. So Indra despatched to the seer's āçrama an *apsarās* named Jālādapī with orders to obstruct his *tapas*. When Gautama Çaradvat saw her there, wearing a single garment with a figure incomparable in the world (*loke apratimasamsthānām*), his eyes bulged (*utphullanayano abhavat*), his bow and arrows fell from his hands, and a shudder (*vepathus*) went through his body. Although the ṛṣi regained his composure - for so strong was his knowledge and *tapas* - still, without noticing, he shed his seed. As the seed fell on a reed it split into two, and from the two halves were born Kṛpa and Kṛpī.² Still, the desired effect was achieved. By shedding his seed Çaradvat Gautama also depleted his *tapas*.

However, Indra's tactics were not always so successful. Occasionally, though not often, the ṛṣi's strength was such that he was able to resist the temptation. When the *apsarās* Rambhā disturbed Viçvāmītra's devotions with her alluring ways, the ṛṣi cursed her to be turned into stone.³

By far the most destructive consequences of a ṛṣi's *tapas* were normally reserved for demons and *rākṣasas*. Vasiṣṭha, as we have seen, repelled a large army of *rākṣasas* for King Mucukunda. And when the *rākṣasa* Puloman attempted to abduct Bhṛgu's pregnant wife Pulomā, the child Cyavana fell from her womb, and 'shining like the sun' he burnt the *rākṣasa* to ashes.⁴ Perhaps the foremost

1) *Ibid.*, 65.20 - 66.9.

2) *Ibid.*, 120.2-21.

3) Tapovighnakarī caiva pañcacūḍā susaṃmatā/
Rambhā nāmāpsarāḥ çāpādyasya çailatvamāgatā// Anuçāsanaparvan, 3.11.
Compare Çalyaparvan, 39.25 where the gods repeatedly attempt but fail to obstruct Viçvāmītra's *tapas* for becoming a brahmin.

4) Ādiparvan, 6.1-4.

destroyer of demons in the Epic is Agastya. In one myth it is recounted how a *daitya* called Ilvala had developed a special dislike of brahmins after a certain brahmin had refused to grant him a son who would be the equal of Indra. Now, Ilvala's method of exacting revenge on brahmins was novel to say the least. Possessed of the power to call the dead back to life, Ilvala adopted the habit of cooking up his younger brother Vātāpi and feeding him to brahmins as goat. When he called his brother back, Vātāpi would burst open the side of the brahmin laughing.¹ But when the cooked Vātāpi was offered in this fashion to Agastya - whose extraordinary powers of digestion had been demonstrated when he drank the ocean - the great *ṛṣi* merely broke wind when Ilvala recalled his brother.²

For the most part, then, the *ṛṣis* repeatedly demonstrate their total mastery over all the creatures of the triple-world. It is only the gods who occasionally achieve the upper hand by exploiting the original erotic aspects of *tapas* or heat.

At the same time it is important to note that the *ṛṣis* rarely test their powers against the great Gods, and when they do they are invariably put in their place. In the *Āraṇyakaparvan* there is related the story of Mañkaṇaka, where the great seer (*maharṣi*) cut his hand with a blade of *kuṣa* grass. Finding that vegetable juice (*çākaraso*) flowed from the wound, the ascetic (*mahātapāḥ*) was filled with delight and began to dance. And as he danced, all animate and inanimate creatures began to dance too, whereupon the gods and *ṛṣis* beseeched the great God (*mahādeva*) to stop Mañkaṇaka from his dancing. Çiva then appeared before the *ṛṣi*, and after hearing the reason for the joyous dancing, he pierced his thumb with his fingernail and from the wound fell ashes. Mañkaṇaka now became ashamed, and falling down he gave praise to Çiva as the Supreme God, the maker and cause of the worlds.³

1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 94.4-9.

2) *Ibid.*, 97.1-7.

3) *Ibid.*, 81.97-115; also *Çalyaparvan*, 37.33 ff.

By a much more unusual method, Çiva also gets the better of the Bhārgava ṛṣi Uçanas who served as priest to the *asuras*. To harm the gods, Uçanas once immobilised Kubera with his *yoga* power, and robbed the God of Riches of all his treasure. Enraged Çiva threw the ṛṣi into his mouth and swallowed him whole. After an endless time in the great God's belly, Uçanas pleaded for grace (*prasādam*) and eventually Çiva relented and told him to exit through his penis (*gaccha çīṣṇena mokṣaṇam*) – and for this reason Uçanas became known as Çukra (seed). The still enraged Çiva stood ready to slay the brahmin, but Umā interposed.¹ Elsewhere, too, when the great ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha had cursed Çiva's devotee, the ṛṣi Grtsamada, to be a wild animal for committing a sacrificial error, the great God overruled the curse and bestowed immortality and other boons.²

In the *Āçvamedhikaparvan*, the sage Uttan̄ka threatens to curse Kṛṣṇa, the incarnate form of Viṣṇu, for his failure to prevent the great battle. To this Kṛṣṇa tartly retorted: 'No human is able to prevail over me with a little *tapas*.'³ Not wishing to see the ṛṣi waste his *tapas* (*na ... tapaso nāçamicchāmī*) Kṛṣṇa proceeded to reveal to the ṛṣi his divine nature and the reason for his periodic incarnations. When Uttan̄ka finally realizes Kṛṣṇa's true nature he is duly humbled and requests a sight of the God's cosmic form.⁴ The clash between the ṛṣi and the great God is thus averted, although it would only seem to have arisen because of Uttan̄ka's ignorance of Kṛṣṇa's true nature.

As full-time specialists in the practice of *tapas* the ṛṣis, *munis* and *tapodhanas* are in the capacity of the truly extraordinary. However, *tapas* is by no means an exclusive practice beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, for it is variously commended as a sure path to the achievement of ends both spiritual and worldly. As Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira, not just ṛṣis, ancestors and

1) Çāntiparvan, 278.1-38.

2) Anuçāsanaparvan, 18.15-22.

3) *Na ca māṃ tapasālpena çakto abhibhavitum pumān*// *Āçvamedhikaparvan*, 52.24.

4) *Ibid.*, 52.7-14.

gods are preoccupied with *tapas*, but so too are men and all other creatures, animate and inanimate. They all succeed through *tapas* alone (*sidhyanti tapasā ca te*). Even the very gods attained their exalted position through *tapas*; and, in turn, the status of the gods may be attained through *tapas*.¹ Elsewhere Bhīṣma puts perhaps more emphasis on the worldly rewards of *tapas*. While one may attain heaven and knowledge through *tapas*, fame, long life, pleasure, wealth, good health, beauty, kingdom and power may also be won.² Perhaps Indra best sums up the significance of *tapas* for mortals when he tells Sruçāvati:

Everything is attained by *tapas*. Everything depends on *tapas*. The divine regions of the gods, O beautiful faced (lady) can be attained through *tapas*. *Tapas* is the root of great happiness. Men who renounce their bodies after having performed terrible *tapas* here, attain the status of gods, O blessed lady; heed these words of mine.³

While logically *tapas* made all creatures in the triple-world potentially equal in terms of power, in some parts where the pre-eminence of brahmins is uncompromisingly asserted over gods, *asuras*, *rākṣasas* and so on, the assumption must be that it made them more 'equal' than the rest.⁴ Not only are brahmins said to be above the gods, ancestors, men, *rākṣasas* and snakes, but they have the power to make one not a god into a god, and even to divest one who is a god of divinity itself.⁵ Indeed, the gods became dwellers in Heaven only through the grace (*prasādāt*) of the brahmins; and the *asuras* reside in the waters because they disregarded the brahmins.⁶ It is even said that Indra attained the kingship of the gods by reverencing (*sampūjayāmāsa*) the brahmins consequent on the advice of the virtuous demon Çambara!⁷ Enraged the brahmins could create (*srjeyus*) other worlds and other World Guardians.⁸

1) Çāntiparvan, 155.11-13.

2) Anuçāsanaparvan, 57.8-11.

3) *Tapasā labhyate sarvaṃ sarvaṃ tapasi tiṣṭhati//*

Yāni sthānāni divyāni vibudhānāṃ çubhānane/

Tapasā tāni prāpyāni tapomūlaṃ mahatsukham//

Iha kṛtvā tapo ghoram deham samnyasya mānavāḥ/

Devatvaṃ yānti kalyāni çṛṇu cedam vaco mama// Çalyaparvan, 47.13-15.

4) See especially Anuçāsanaparvan, 33.1-27, 35.1-23, 36.1-19, 136.1-23.

5) *Ibid.*, 33.14-16.

6) *Ibid.*, 35.19.

7) *Ibid.*, 36.1-19.

8) *Ibid.*, 136.16.

(*prasādam*) of the gods by employing terrible *tapas* (*tapasā yojayātmānam-ugreṇa*).¹ So, on the peak of Mount Himālaya Arjuna practised extreme austerities, mortifying his body. Dressed in grass, bark and deerskins, for the first month he ate only fruit every third night, while for the second month he ate only every sixth night. For the third month he ate but once a fortnight, and then only a dead leaf that had fallen on the ground. During the fourth month he subsisted on the wind alone (*vāyubhakṣo*) while standing on the tips of his toes with his arms upraised. By this stage Arjuna's inner-heat of *tapas* had become so great that he covered all the four directions with smoke (*dhūmāyandiṣaḥ*) and began to heat up (*saṃtāpayati*) the anxious celestials.² Thereupon Ćiva did appear to Arjuna but in the guise of a mountain man; and after testing him in personal combat, the satisfied (*tuṣṭo*) and pleased (*prītimānasmi*) great God allowed all that Arjuna sought.³

Elsewhere, after the love-struck King Jayadratha of the Sindhus had been manhandled and humiliated by the Pāṇḍavas for abducting Draupadī, he performed severe *tapas* (*tapaścacāra vipulaṃ*) to obtain from Ćiva the boon of being able to defeat all the Pāṇḍavas. Although Ćiva became pleased (*prīto*) with his *tapas* he modified Jayadratha's wish, allowing the boon that he would be able to stay all the Pāṇḍavas in battle except Arjuna.⁴ The Princess Ambā, desperate to avenge herself on Bhīṣma for wrecking her marital prospects, repaired to an *āgrama* on the bank of the Yamunā and there practised superhuman *tapas* (*tapastepe atimānuṣam*):

For six months (she lived) abstaining from food, emaciated, dried out, with braided hair, covered with dirt and mire, subsisting on air - an ascetic, immovable like a post. Proceeding to the bank of the Yamuna, she then spent another year standing in the water, lustrous and without food. Hot with wrath, standing on the tips of her toes, she passed a further year (subsisting) on one shrivelled leaf. For 12 years she scorched heaven and earth so.⁵

1) *Ibid.*, 38.10-11.

2) *Ibid.*, 39.21-30.

3) *Ibid.*, 40.27-60; 41.1-15.

4) *Ibid.*, 256.25-29.

5) *Nirāhārā kṛcā rūkṣā jaṭilā malapaṅkinī/*
ṣaṇmāsānvāyubhakṣā ca sthāṇubhūtā tapodhanā//

Bhagīratha is another who performs terrible *tapas*, in this case to propitiate the Goddess Gaṅgā to obtain the boon that she would descend to earth to wash the remains of his ancestors.¹ Prince Bhagīratha also satisfies (*toṣayāmāsa*) Īva with *tapas* and receives the boon he desired when the great God agreed to break the fall of the Gaṅgā upon his head as it cascaded from heaven to earth.²

However, more ordinary mortals who performed *tapas* were not entirely dependent upon the pleasure of the gods for the fulfillment of their aims. Like the *ṛṣis* they too could directly affect the course of events through the power of their *tapas*. Undoubtedly the most spectacular example in the *Mahābhārata* is that of Queen Gāndhārī, mother to the 100 Dhārtarāṣṭras. After Duryodhana had been struck down by Bhīma contrary to the rules of battle by clubs, Yudhiṣṭhira was afflicted by a great fear (*mahadbhayaṃ*) as he thought of the virtuous Queen Gāndhārī: 'Endowed with terrible *tapas* she could even burn down the three worlds.'³ In his caution, Yudhiṣṭhira decided to despatch Kṛṣṇa to the court of Hastinapura to appease Gāndhārī, before their own arrival. Yudhiṣṭhira feared that in her anger she would reduce them to ashes (*bhasmasānnaḥ kariṣyati*) with the fire of her mind (*mānasenāgninā*).⁴ When Kṛṣṇa presented himself before Gāndhārī he too was well aware of the terrible danger: 'Through the strength of your *tapas*, O highly blessed (lady) you are capable of burning down with your eyes - ablaze with anger - the animate and inanimate earth.'⁵ However, as always Kṛṣṇa had a way with words and he did manage to mollify Gāndhārī;⁶

Yamunātīramāsādyā saṃvatsaramathāparam/
 Udavāsaṃ nirāhārā pārayāmāsa bhāminī//
 Īrṇaparṇena caikena pārayāmāsa cāparam//
 Saṃvatsaraṃ tivrakopā pādāṅguṣṭhāgradhiṣṭhitā//
 Evaṃ dvādaṣa varṣāṇi tāpayāmāsa rodasī/ Udyogaparvan, 187.19-22.

- 1) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 107.13-22. 2) *Ibid.*, 107.21 - 108.1.
- 3) Ghoreṇa tapasā yuktāṃ trailokyamapi sā dahet// *Ālyaparvan*, 62.10.
- 4) *Ibid.*, 62.12; see 62.1-12.
- 5) *Āktā cāsi mahābhāge prthivīm sacarācarām/
 Cakṣuṣā krodhādīptena nirdagdhum tapaso balāt// Ibid.*, 62.60.
- 6) See *Ālyaparvan*, 62.36-65.

but only temporarily. When the Pāṇḍavas do eventually arrive at court Gāndhārī was again intent on cursing Yudhiṣṭhira, but divining her evil intention (*pāpamabhiprāyaṃ*) the sage Vyāsa appeared and exhorted her not to curse the Pāṇḍavas but to forgive them.¹ While agreeing, Gāndhārī could not entirely restrain her anger, especially at the way Duryodhana had been slain. Thus when she met the fearful Yudhiṣṭhira she turned her eyes downwards towards his toe, and the nail became deformed (*kunakhībhūto*), or presumably burned. Seeing this Arjuna retreated behind Arjuna's back, and the other Pāṇḍavas stirred uneasily.² ?

But, as we have already seen, it was upon Kṛṣṇa that Gāndhārī's real ire eventually settled. Drawing upon the *tapas* she had amassed through devotion to her husband,³ she cursed Kṛṣṇa to bring about the destruction of his own people 36 years hence, before he himself died in contemptible (*kutsitena*) fashion.⁴ On the face of it, there is considerable irony in a situation where a virtuous mortal, drawing upon the power of *tapas*, determines the destruction of the incarnate form of the great God Viṣṇu. However, the significance is somewhat mitigated by the suggestion in the text that Gāndhārī had merely decreed what Kṛṣṇa ultimately desired: the destruction of all *kṣatriyas*, including his own people. Thus while Gāndhārī pronounced her terrible words, Kṛṣṇa merely smiled (*abhyutsmayan*) before replying: 'There is no other destroyer of the Vṛṣṇi multitudes, O virtuous (lady), but myself. ... They are incapable of being slain by other men, or even gods or *dānavas*. Therefore the Yādavas will meet with a destruction performed by themselves.'⁵ The clear implication is that Kṛṣṇa had the power to override the curse but chose not to. The power of Gāndhārī's *tapas* was effective, but only because the great God allowed it to be so.

1) Strīparvan, 13.1-11.

2) *Ibid.*, 15.7-8.

3) *Paṭiṣṭhāyā yanme tapaḥ kiṃcidupārjitaṃ* / *ibid.*, 25.39.

4) *Ibid.*, 25.36-42.

5) *Samhartā vṛṣṇicakrasya nānyo madvidyate ṣubhe* / (44)

Avadhyāste narairanyairapi vā devadānavaiḥ

Parasparakṛtaṃ nāṣamataḥ prāpsyanti yādavāḥ // (45) *ibid.*, 25.44-45.

In one context or another, then, *tapas* is amongst the most essential concepts to be found in the Epic. The whole phenomenal world was brought forth by the creative power of *tapas*, and it is a power that any creature in the triple-world can generate for their own ends. For man the generation of *tapas* was a potent method by which he could secure spiritual salvation or some worldly end, and more especially the latter in the *Mahābhārata*. Consequently it enabled man to take substantial charge of his own destiny if he so chose to, and this was as true for the orthodox *pravṛtti* tradition as for the renunciatory *nivṛtti* tradition with which *tapas* is perhaps more normally associated.

Knowledge, as a means of attaining human ends, had been of the first importance as early as the Vedic tradition, for the potential of the mysterious sacrificial ritual, and the power of *brahman* that made it effective, could only be tapped with proper knowledge. According to one later text, without correct knowledge the sacrifice was no better than an offering poured on dead ashes.¹ Indeed, without knowledge the sacrificial ritual and *mantras* could be positively dangerous because of the power that inhered in them.

The goals that Vedic man sought from the sacrifice were wealth, power, health, progeny and other forms of worldly prosperity, along with permanent immortality in heaven after death. But by the late *Brāhmaṇas* there were signs of a growing pessimism towards life, the origins of which are not fully clear. As the ideas of *samsāra*, karma and the cyclical concept of Time came to be increasingly accepted and defined, the world took on a much more frightening aspect. By comparison, the rewards that sacrificial knowledge could yield, while not to be dismissed, seemed of much less importance. As a consequence, the mental energies of the time came to be directed away from the sacrifice and

1) T.J. Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition, p.31.

towards the search for a form of religious salvation that would be truly permanent, free of the corrosive effect of Time, change and death.

The *Upaniṣads* especially demonstrate the degree to which questions concerning the ultimate nature of man and the phenomenal world of which he was a part became the predominant intellectual concerns. The teachings in the *Upaniṣads* are highly speculative and agreement is not easy to come by. To the extent to which there is a central teaching it is that the essential self of man, normally called the *ātman*, is either of the same nature as or is actually identical with the ultimate or absolute reality of the universe, normally called *Brahman* - where *Brahman* is perceived as a changeless state of being, beyond space and time, which upheld or pervaded the phenomenal world. It followed, or so it was generally agreed, that man suffered because of his ignorance of the true nature of reality. Oblivious to his timeless and immortal centre, man pursued worldly desires in a vain attempt to satisfy his false notion of individual self; and by the law of karma the consequences of his actions propelled him through time from life to life, and misery to misery. According to the Upaniṣadic diagnosis salvation could only come from full intuitive knowledge of the relationship between the individual's timeless self and the ultimate ground of the universe, in the light of which everything to do with the transient phenomenal world could only seem distasteful. And once worldly desires had been forsaken, one became free of the law of karma and the misery of endless transmigration. So at death the mortal body perished, while the immortal soul, with no karmic consequences to bind it to phenomenal existence, attained *mokṣa* or liberation from the material world. The pursuit of this saving knowledge was considered exacting indeed, but through it man could determine his destiny in the most ultimate sense, and attain a state of 'freedom' that transcended the phenomenal world. As the sage Yājñavalkya put it in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 'Verily, while we are here we may know this. If you have known it not, great is the destruction. Those who know this become immortal. But others go only to

sorrow.¹

While this much was generally agreed there remained endless room for disagreement on the precise nature of *ātman* and *Brahman*, the relationship between the two, the position of a personal god if any, the mechanism of bondage, transmigration and release, and so on. Such questions were to be the perennial preoccupation of Hindu thinkers from then on. Nevertheless, the importance of knowledge as a means by which the individual could determine his destiny and attain salvation remained constant.²

The later *Upaniṣads* also present an array of teachings on techniques of mental and physical 'discipline', or *yoga* as it was to be called, which facilitated the attainment of saving knowledge. The purpose of *yoga* was to control the bodily functions, senses and then the mental processes until everything that was non-self was brought to rest, allowing the true immortal self to be revealed. *Yoga* involved varied practices for mortifying the flesh, disciplining the body, controlling the breathing, meditation (*dhyāna*) and absorption (*samādhi*).³ Many of these practices, the origins of which lie both inside and outside of the orthodox tradition, are of course similar to those examined above for the generation of *tapas*.⁴ But here the *tapas* generated by *yoga* is viewed as an adjunct to knowledge, for it is through knowledge that man saves himself and determines his fate.

Encyclopaedia that it is, the *Mahābhārata* exhibits a range of attitudes towards life with Upaniṣadic pessimism being only one. Perhaps the wise Vidura puts the view best in a parable on life to King Dhṛtarāṣṭra who was filled with grief at the news of Duryodhana's death. Vidura relates that once a certain brahmin found himself in a large forest abounding in terrible beasts of prey.

1) Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, 4.4.14, in R. Hume, *op.cit.*, p.142.

2) R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, pp.45-63; M. Eliade, *Yoga ... op.cit.*, pp.114-17.

3) See Eliade, *Yoga ... op.cit.*, pp.117-27.

4) cf. *Ibid.*, pp.101-114.

The brahmin ran around in great fear but he could not escape the forest for it was surrounded by a net, and a fearsome woman stood there stretching her arms. Now in that forest was a pit covered over with herbs and creepers from a tree, and the frantic brahmin soon tumbled into it and became entangled in the creepers that left him hanging head downwards. From this unfortunate position the brahmin noticed a large snake at the bottom of the pit waiting for his fall, while nearby a mighty elephant approached at the top. About the mouth of the pit flew many dreadful bees attracted to the honey that dripped from a honeycomb on the tree; and, worst of all, black and white rats gnawed at the roots of the tree from which he hung. Nevertheless, despite his dire plight, the brahmin greedily drank the honey unable to sate his thirst for it; and nor did he ever lose hope of life.¹ Vidura then explained how this parable, recited by those conversant with *mokṣa*, represented the terrible world of *saṃsāra*. The forest was the wide world, while the terrible beasts within were diseases and the fearsome woman was decrepitude which destroyed youth and beauty. The pit was the body of embodied creatures, and the huge snake within was Time, the destroyer of all embodied beings. The creepers by which the brahmin was suspended represented man's desire for life while the great elephant with six faces and twelve feet was the year, its faces being the seasons and its feet the months. The rats gnawing at the tree were the days and nights which remorselessly eat away the life of mortals. The bees were the desires of men and the sweet honey was the pleasure to be had from feeding these desires. Concluded Vidura: 'The wise, who understand the course of the wheel of transmigration to be so, break the bonds of life's wheel through it.'²

While no doubt someone with the more violent and gluttonous instincts of Bhīmasena would have considered Vidura's pessimistic words as so much prattle,

1) Strīparvan, 5.3-22.

2) Evaṃ saṃsāracakrasya parivṛttiṃ sma ye viduḥ/

Te vai saṃsāracakrasya pāṇḍachindanti vai budhāḥ// ibid., 6.12; see 6.1-11.

it nevertheless reflected deeply held attitudes about the lot of mortals. Throughout the philosophical (especially the *Mokṣadharmā*) and didactic sections of the *Mahābhārata*, we find many teachings proclaiming some intellectual formula through which men could attain salvation from the terrors of *samsāra*. To infer that the teachings are 'inexact, hazy, syncretistic, and poorly organised ideas', as does Eliade,¹ is perhaps a little strong, though not entirely unfounded. It would be more accurate to point out that the principal Upaniṣadic speculations on the nature of man and reality were, in succeeding centuries, to be developed by thinkers into the six orthodox schools of classical Hindu philosophy. The *Mahābhārata* represents an inbetween period when philosophical ideas and positions were still being worked out. Many essential ideas are there but it is not until the post-Epic period that they attain the status of formalised systems. If any set of ideas could be said to predominate it would be those that would become the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools. But it would take us far beyond our topic to try to unravel the ideas and influences at work in the Epic on the attainment of the saving knowledge necessary for *mokṣa*.² In any case, *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* ideas are perhaps best developed in the *Bhagavadgītā*, and we shall examine them more thoroughly there.

At this point it is sufficient to emphasise what the *Mahābhārata* frequently does. Firstly, knowledge is the key to salvation. As the sage Vyāsa, explaining *Yoga* and *Sāṃkhya* to his son Çuka, puts it:

Now if (a man) is to be enlightened, he should struggle with the mind. For one rising and sinking (in the cycle of transmigration), knowledge is like a raft. The wise, through their understanding of the causes (of

1) Eliade, *Yoga ... op.cit.*, p.127.

2) The most thorough studies (at least of the Vulgate Edition) are E.W. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin*, pp.85-190 and E.W. Hopkins, 'Yoga-technique in the Great Epic', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.xxii (1901), pp.333-79; also S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, pp.501-5. For an excellent collation and translation of the principal philosophical sections of the *Mokṣadharmā*, see F. Edgerton (ed.), *The beginnings of Indian Philosophy*, pp.256-334.

bondage), are able to rescue (even) the foolish with the rafts (of knowledge). The foolish can never rescue themselves (let alone) others.'

Secondly, the knowledge required for salvation is no mere intellectual wisdom passed from teacher to student, but experiential knowledge to be attained by a rigorous process of physical and mental discipline. As in the *Upaniṣads*, human effort and exertion of the highest order were necessary for the attainment of salvation. Bhīṣma, for instance, suggests the rigours and the reward to

Yudhiṣṭhira:

Seeing birth, death, old age, suffering, sickness and mental weariness woven into this world, an intelligent (man) should strive for liberation. Free from pride he should be pure in mind, body and speech. Calm, endued with knowledge, indifferent (to worldly objects) he should wander untroubled as a religious mendicant. ... (but) Without a doubt, he who, with mind steadied, is indifferent, free of all ties, wanders alone, eats little, performs *tapas*, restrains his senses, burns away suffering with knowledge, is devoted to the performance of *yoga*, and has his self controlled, attains the Absolute (*Brahman*).²

Thirdly, while formally *Sāṃkhya* emphasises knowledge and *Yoga* emphasises activity for the attainment of religious salvation, at various points it is accepted that the two approaches are more truly opposite sides of the same coin. That is, the activity of *Yoga* presupposes the knowledge of *Sāṃkhya*, while the knowledge of *Sāṃkhya* is only meaningful with the activity of *Yoga*. The

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- 1) Atha cedrocayedetaddruhyeta manasā tathā/
 Unmajjañca nīmajjañca jñānavānplavavānbhavet//
 Prajñayā nīrmitairdhīrāstārayantyabudhānplavaiḥ/
 Nābudhāstārayantyanyānātmānaṃ vā kathamcana// *Çāntiparvan*, 228.1-2. Also see *Çāntiparvan*, 17.22-23, 207.1-7, 210.28, 231.5, 233.7-11, 241.5-13, 242.10-24, 289.7-8, 306.84, *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, 42.41-42, 47.1-4, 49.3.
- 2) Janmamṛtyujarāduḥkhairvyādhībhirmanasaḥ klamaiḥ/
 Drṣṭvemaṃ saṃtataṃ lokaṃ ghaṭenmokṣāya buddhimān// (2)
 Vāñmanobhyāṃ çarīreṇa çuciḥ syādanahamkṛtaḥ/
 Praçānto jñānavānbhikṣurnirapekṣaçaretasukham// (3)
 Nīḥsaṃdigdhamanīho vai muktaḥ sarvaparigrahaiḥ/
 Viviktacarī laghvāçī tapasvī niyatendriyaḥ// (15)
 Jñānadagdhaparikleçaḥ prayogaratiṛātmavān/
 Niṣpracāreṇa manasā paraṃ tadadhigacchatī// *Çāntiparvan*, 208.2-3 & 15-16.
 The physical and mental disciplines recommended for transforming intellectual awareness of the nature of reality into intuitive realisation are discussed in many places, although consensus on almost anything in the *Mahābhārata* would be too much to hope for. See *Çāntiparvan*, 17.15-23, 188.1-22, 208.15-19, 222.1-24, 228.4-38, 231.5-20, 232.1-34, 242.2-7, 294.6-25, 304.12-17, *Āṣvamedhikaparvan*, 42.41-61, 50.1-6, 50.22-37.

difference is ultimately one of emphasis.' Fourthly, the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* teachings specifically warn the true religious seeker against being distracted by the extraordinary supernatural powers to be attained through the discipline of yoga.² Their pursuit was unworthy and would make the *yogin* little more than a magician. There is an obvious comparison here between the *nivṛtti* ṛṣis intent on *mokṣa*, and the *pravṛtti* ṛṣis busily amassing *tapas*.

The final means we shall discuss by which mortals could effect their own destiny is that of worship of a personal god. Through worship the devotee could win the grace and favour of the god in the achievement of a particular end, be it worldly or spiritual. The Hindu term normally applied to this approach is that of *bhaktimārga*, or the way of devotional faith and love to a personal God. The word *bhakti*, along with the related words *bhagavat* and *bhāgavata*, is derived from the Sanskrit root *bhaj* which, in this sense, has the meaning to adore, revere, love.³ Thus *bhakti* has the primary sense of 'adoration' or 'love' while *bhagavat* means 'the Adorable One', and *bhāgavata*, 'a worshipper of the Adorable One.'

Although *bhakti* was to become an essential element in the religion of perhaps 90 per cent of Hindus, and has continued to have the greatest possible effect on Hinduism,⁴ its importance in the Hindu tradition came surprisingly late. Some authors have sought the origins of *bhakti* within the *Vedas*, pointing to certain devotional elements such as the ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha's supplicatory hymns to Varuṇa as a god of grace and mercy.⁵ And there is no doubt that Vedic man

1) cf. *Çāntiparvan*, 289.1-9, 293.29-30, 295.42-46.

2) cf. *ibid.*, 228.37, 232.21-22, 289.26-29.

3) Monier-Williams, *op.cit.*, p.743.

4) G. Grierson, 'Bhakti-marga' in Hastings, *op.cit.*, vol.2, pp.539-51.; G. Grierson, 'The Nārāyaṇīya and the Bhāgavatas', *Indian Antiquary*, vol.37 (1908), p.251; T.J. Solomon, 'Early Vaiṣṇava Bhakti and its Autochthonous Heritage' in *History of Religions*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1970), pp.32-3.

5) R.N. Dandekar, *Exercises in Indology*, pt.3, pp.113-121; M. Dasgupta, *Çraddha and Bhakti in Vedic Literature*, Pt. 1', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol.6 (1930), pp.327-8; E.W. Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, p.8.

believed that all sorts of personal and spiritual benefits could be won from the favour of the gods duly pleased by an appropriate attitude of supplication. At the same time we may heed Wayman's view that *bhakti*, in the sense of love of god, is not to be found in the *Vedas* for in the worship of Varuṇa the 'mood was of utter helplessness before a mighty feared power ("stern father") (while) to Indra (the) mood was solicitation of former comradeship and favours ("indulgent mother").'¹

Perhaps it is this very lack of loving devotional fervour that partly explains why by the *Brahmāṇas* the early Vedic trends towards a truly theistic position petered out as all the Vedic gods lost their importance to the sacrificial ritual. Consequently when later Vedic man desired to achieve some end he turned not to the gods but to the power of the sacrifice and his own *tapas*. As the stature of the gods diminished, so man's faith in his own powers rose.

The situation did not immediately change even when the significance of the sacrifice began to be questioned. Intellectual energies, as we have seen, were directed not towards the search for a supreme personal God, but towards defining man's relationship to the ultimate ground of the universe, the impersonal Absolute called *Brahman*. It was pantheism and monism, rather than theism, that came to the fore. Salvation was to be attained by knowledge gained through strenuous discipline, and not by the grace of a personal God.

But by the time of the later *Upaniṣads* and the *Epics* the situation had begun to change again. This was a period of crisis for the orthodox tradition. Faced with the challenge from heterodox faiths and the perhaps massive exodus of society's disillusioned into forest and monastic retreats of one sort or another, brahmin intellectuals freely adapted the all too ritualistic and intellectual orthodox tradition to make it a more popular and viable religious

1) A. Wayman, 'Early Bhakti' in J. Elder (ed), Civilisation of India Syllabus.

system. Critical to their effort was the acceptance into the brahmanical system of the great popular interest in personal anthropomorphic gods, which had flourished all the time outside the bounds of orthodoxy. Thus, in the *Çvetāçvatara* and *Kaṭha Upaniṣads* especially, we see the emergence of a more or less full form of theism with the personal God Rudra-Çiva being set above the unconditioned *Brahman*. However, the old Vedic Rudra is now no longer one god among many but the Great Lord (*maheçvara*) who emanates, upholds and reabsorbs the universe into his own being. He is the First Cause, the omnipotent and omniscient ruler of the universe, who transcends both the perishable world and the imperishable *Brahman*.¹

But it is not until the *Mahābhārata* that we find revealed the full extent of the theistic and devotional surge that had built up largely outside of the orthodox tradition.² It is in the *Mahābhārata* that we first fully glimpse the complex of beliefs and traditions that had grown up around Viṣṇu, Çiva, and to a lesser extent Brahmā. We have already seen how all three are variously described in theistic fashion as the Supreme God who is the origin of all that is other than Himself. Ultimately it is Viṣṇu who receives the most attention, though fortunately the Epic falls short of outright sectarianism for all three great Gods come with their own well-developed cosmology, theology and mythology.

The importance of the *Mahābhārata* as a devotional text has been especially emphasised in recent works. Madeleine Biardeau has termed the *Mahābhārata* 'le monument principal, et sans doute le plus ancien, de la *bhakti*.'³ It is a view which Hildebrandt readily endorses: 'The point of departure for this study is thus an assumption not widely shared but, nevertheless, compelling in its

1) See R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, pp.80-82; and R.C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, pp.1-85.

2) Solomon, especially, finds it more profitable to search for the origins of Hindu devotionalism in the autochthonous non-Aryan religious tradition. Solomon, *op.cit.*, pp.32-48.

3) M. Biardeau, *L'Hindouisme: Anthropologie d'une civilisation*, p.78.

widening application, that the *Mahābhārata* in its classical form is a work of *bhakti* through and through.¹ However, we may question whether *bhakti*, at least in the sense of loving devotion, is not being here confused with the praise due to any theistic god.

For the devotees of Viṣṇu, Īiva and Brahmā, the supremacy of their special God as the God was undoubted, and the part they are deemed to play in the triple-world has been examined above. As they were considered by their devotees to be the being than whom there was none greater, they are worthy of the most thorough-going praise and honour.² Occasionally the praise is offered up with a specific purpose in mind, to which the great God then responds. Thus in the *Anuṣāsanaparvan* various great sages step forward to tell Yudhiṣṭhira of the benefits they had received through the worship of Īiva. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana relates how his wish for a son had been fulfilled after he had recited a *stotra* of praise to Īiva.³ The sages Vālmīki and Jāmadagnya, guilty of the sin of brahminicide, praised Īiva with his names and sought his refuge. When Īiva was satisfied (*tuṣṭo*) he purified them of sin and in addition bestowed on Jāmadagnya invincibility and various divine weapons.⁴ The ṛṣi Ṛtsamada also sought the protection of Īiva after he had been cursed by Vasiṣṭha to become a deer for committing a sacrificial error. Overriding the curse, Īiva also bestowed the boons of immortality and freedom from suffering.⁵ The ṛṣi Gālava relates that upon the completion of his studies he had received permission from his *guru* Viṣvāmitra to return home where his father was ailing. Anxious he would not see his father again, he praised Īiva, and the God restored his father's health.⁶

But in this praise, and in much of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, there is a

1) A. Hiltebeitel, 'The Two Kṛṣṇas on One Chariot: Upaniṣadic Imagery and Epic Mythology', *History of Religions*, vol.24, no.1 (1984), p.1.

2) cf. the *sahasranāmastotras* to Īiva and Viṣṇu. *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 13-17, 135.

3) *Anuṣāsanaparvan*, 18.1-3.

4) *Ibid.*, 18.7-13.

5) *Ibid.*, 18.15-22.

6) *Ibid.*, 18.38-44.

marked lack of the devotional warmth and fervour that came to characterise Purāṇic Hinduism; although entering into a warm, emotional relationship of *bhakti* love with the God of universal destruction may have presented extra difficulties. It is also noteworthy that in most instances where mortals approach a great God for the achievement of a specific end, it is not fulsome praise, let alone loving devotion, that they offer but *tapas*. After the performance of the most exacting austerities, the 'satisfied' or 'pleased' God would offer the desired boon or an appropriate modification. While for the lesser gods *tapas* was often little more than a thinly veiled threat, for the great Gods its performance could be taken as a measure of the worshipper's devotion (for instance, when Arundhatī cooked jujubes for Īśa). Nevertheless, the offering of *tapas* was still a far cry from the *Purāṇas* where even the smallest show of devotion is normally sufficient to bring the great God hurrying to the rescue, even where the devotee may seem otherwise undeserving.¹ It is as if the Epic's theism had restored God to His supremacy over the created world without yet taking away from man the importance he had arrogated to himself through the sacrifice and *tapas*.

The *Mahābhārata*'s claim to being a work of *bhakti* would seem to rest principally with the importance of the *Bhagavadgītā* where Kṛṣṇa, with all the atmosphere of a profound and secret new revelation, instructs Arjuna that not only should man love God, but that God loves man and will freely reciprocate the love offered to him. If man made the effort to love God, then God would lift him up to salvation. The revelation was of the profoundest importance for the Hindu tradition, and from our point of view too for with it the emphasis switched decisively from man's effort to God's effort. God's supremacy and man's subservience were now undeniable.² Even then, the loving devotion or *bhakti* of the *Gītā* is a much more sober affair than that of the fully developed Hindu

1) cf. O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil ... op.cit.*, pp.231-37.

2) See below pp.415-21.

tradition.¹

Outside of the *Gīta* the instances of *bhakti* based on reciprocal love and devotion seem relatively few, and to be confined to some later Vaiṣṇavite interpolations. In the *Çāntiparvan*, King Janamejaya does outline to Vaiṣampāyana the superiority and immediacy of exclusive devotion to Viṣṇu compared to other approaches to salvation:

Aho, the blessed Hari is delighted with all who are exclusively devoted to (Him). And the blessed (Lord) accepts the adoration, undertaken according to ordinance, (which is offered) to Him. ... Those persons who are exclusively devoted (to Hari) go to the highest end. Undoubtedly this religion of exclusive devotion, which is dear to Nārāyaṇa, is the most excellent since, without passing through the three stages (of life) they go (directly) to the immutable Hari. I consider the way of those exclusively devoted (to Hari) to be superior to those brahmins who, duly abiding by requirements, study the *Vedas* with the *Upaniṣads* according to the ordinances, and also to those who follow the religion of the ascetic.²

After explaining how this religion (*dharma*) derived from Nārāyaṇa Himself and appeared in each successive world cycle, Vaiṣampāyana asserts that it was equal (*tulya*) to the systems of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*. But significantly salvation was possible not through the will of man but only through the grace of God. 'Looked upon by Nārāyaṇa', Vaiṣampāyana explained, 'a man may be enlightened. Thus, O king, enlightenment does not arise at one's own wish.'³

In one other Vaiṣṇavite myth, Viṣṇu rescues a devoted devotee from a much more worldly plight. Asked to adjudicate a dispute between the gods and brahmins on the validity of animal sacrifice, King Vasu decides in favour of the

1) See especially N. Hein, 'A Revolution in Kṛṣṇaism: The Cult of Gopāla', *History of Religions*, vol.25, pt.4 (1986), pp.296-317; and J.L. Masson, 'The Childhood of Kṛṣṇa: Some Psychoanalytical Observations', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.94 (1974), pp.454-7.

2) Aho hyekāntinaḥ sarvānprīṇāti bhagavānharīḥ/
Vidhiprayuktāṃ pūjāṃ ca grhṇāti bhagavānsvayam// (1)
Ekāntinastu puruṣā gacchanti paramaṃ padam// (3)
Nūnamekāntadharmo ayaṃ ṣreṣṭho nārāyaṇapriyaḥ/
Agatvā gatayastisro yadgacchantyavyayaṃ harim// (4)
Sāhopaniṣadānvedānye viprāḥ saṃyagāsthitaḥ/
Paṭhanti vidhimāsthāya ye cāpi yatidharmināḥ// (5)
Tebhyo viṣiṣṭāṃ jñāmi gatimekāntināṃ nrṇām/ *Çāntiparvan*, 336.1-6.

3) Nārāyaṇena drṣṭaṣṭa pratibuddho bhavetpumān/
Evamātmecchayā rājanpratibuddho na jāyate// *Çāntiparvan* 336.70.

gods and animal sacrifice. The brahmins then condemned the king for partiality and cursed him to imprisonment in a deep hole. The gods accorded him the boon of sustenance while he was in captivity and advised him to seek refuge with Viṣṇu. Then Vasu began to continually worship Viṣṇu and to mutter prayers (*japyaṃ*) that had formerly come from the mouth of Nārāyaṇa himself. Now, the blessed Nārāyaṇa became pleased (*tuṣṭo*) with the devotion (*bhaktiā*) of Vasu who showed that he was devoted to no other (*ananyabhaktasya*) and that his self was conquered, and sent Garuḍa to bring him back to Heaven.¹

The problem of individual responsibility is merely the problem of human freedom of choice and action at one remove. For if the individual is entirely dependent, and compelled to act in a certain way by external forces beyond his control, can he reasonably be held responsible for what he has done? Clearly it is easier to affix responsibility if the individual is deemed to have some degree of freedom of action.

That the Epic bards were not unaware of the problem is evident from the way certain key events in the central story-line are developed. We shall focus on two of these: King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's culpability for the great family feud; and Yudhiṣṭhira's participation in the fatal gaming match.

For the Epic bards, the question of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's responsibility is perhaps unavoidable for Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the reigning king. This is important because the *Mahābhārata* develops a theory of kingship which presupposes that a king's first and greatest battle is with himself; for a king who can master and control himself has the power and capacity to master and control his surroundings. The wise Vidura himself emphasises this very fact to his half-brother, Dhṛtarāṣṭra:

Disasters grow like the moon in the bright fortnight for the one who is overcome by his innate five (senses) which drag him along. He who desires

1) *Ibid.*, 324.1-38.

to control his ministers without (first) controlling himself, or (to control) his enemies without controlling his ministers, he comes to grief despite himself. If he first conquers himself as though he were a country, he will not vainly conquer both councillors and enemies. Fortune continually attends upon the wise (king) (who) acts after (due) examination, inflicts punishment on the rebellious, (and) controls his ministers, with senses subdued. ... He who, forsaking Law and Profit, follows after the power of the senses is quickly deprived of wife, wealth, power and fortune.¹

As a consequence, the kingdom of a king who had mastered his senses and who abided by the *dharma* was said to flourish in all manner of ways: the rains fall in abundance; agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade all thrive; the revenues swell; poverty and disease disappear; and all the subjects devote themselves to their work.² Thus the king was deemed to have the duty and the power to effect the course of events around him. It is the king, as the Epic is fond of saying, who makes the times, and not vice versa: 'All (depends on) the conduct of the king. The king alone is said (to make) the Age.'³ From this standpoint, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as the king, was perceived to have the potential freedom of action to influence the course of events - but at a price for he also had the responsibility that went with it.

In the *Mahābhārata*, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra is portrayed as a weak and indecisive ruler who knows what should be done but is quite incapable of doing it because of his sentimental attachment to his sons. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's ineffectualness seems a source of surprise even to himself; and the only explanation he can find is that his actions are controlled from without, the source being variously fate, the Ordainer or the gods. But other observers, alarmed at a situation out of

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- 1) Yo jitaḥ pañcavargeṇa saha jenātmakarçinā/
 Āpadastasya vardhante çuklapakṣa ivoḍurāḍ// (53)
 Avijitya ya ātmānamamātyānvijigīṣate/
 Amitrānvājītāmātyaḥ so avaçaḥ parihīyate// (54)
 Vaçyendriyaṃ jītāmātyaṃ dhṛtadaṇḍaṃ vikāriṣu/
 Parīkṣyakāriṇaṃ dhīramatyantaṃ çrīrniṣevate// (56)
 Dharmārthau yaḥ parityajya syādindriyavaçānugaḥ/
 Çrīprāṇadhanadārebhyaḥ kṣīpraṃ sa parihīyate// (60) Udyogaparvan, 34.53-60.
 Also Sabhāparvan, 5.50, Çāntiparvan, 69.3-5.
 2) Sabhāparvan, 30.1-7, Udyogaparvan, 38.23, Anuçāsanaparvan, 2.12-17.
 3) Rājavyṛttāni sarvāṇi rājaiva yugamucyate// Çāntiparvan, 92.6.

control, dispute this and point the finger of blame at Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself.

In the various Kaurava counsels on how to handle the Pāṇḍava problem, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, along with the other Kuru elders, repeatedly cautions the headstrong younger princes as to the consequences of their proposals. When Duryodhana first presses for pre-emptive action to dispose of the Pāṇḍavas and their newly formed alliance with the Pāñcālas, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is sympathetic to their concerns, but after taking advice from all sides the king accepts the calming views of the elders. Concluding that the sons of his brother Pāṇḍu were by *dharma* his sons too, Dhṛtarāṣṭra chose to partition the kingdom deciding it was ordained as much for the Pāṇḍavas as for his own sons.¹

By the time of Yudhiṣṭhira's magnificent Royal Consecration, however, the Kaurava princes had become older and more wilful while Dhṛtarāṣṭra's infirmities had increased. When Duryodhana, consumed by resentment at the prosperity of the Pāṇḍavas, proposed to his father a family gambling contest, Dhṛtarāṣṭra approved the idea out of love for his son (*putrasnehāḍ*), even though he knew full well the evils of gambling.²

The wise Vidura, the king's half-brother, was aghast at the idea and warned against the divisive consequences. But swayed by affection for his son, Dhṛtarāṣṭra was not receptive to the advice and fell back on the argument that what is fated must be, although it is not entirely clear whether destiny is here the decree of the gods, or whether the idea is that the gods can protect man against the workings of fate. If it is the latter, Dhṛtarāṣṭra certainly did not perceive fate in a strictly deterministic sense for he also felt that he and Bhīṣma could overcome the doings of fate.

O Steward, there will be no quarrel by my sons with my (other) sons. The gods in Heaven will certainly extend us their grace. Whether auspicious or inauspicious, beneficial or ruinous, the family gambling must proceed (for) surely this is destined. When I and the Bull of the Bhāratas, Bhīṣma, are near at hand there can be no misfortune whatsoever ordained

1) Ādiparvan, 198.1-4, 199.24-27.

2) Sabhāparvan, 45.49.

by fate. ... O Vidura, I tell you this: my resolve can not be deterred. I think it is supreme fate alone through which this occurs.¹

Vidura, though, did not consider this course of action fated. Thinking to himself, 'It is not!' (*naitadastīti*),² he hurried away to rally Bhīṣma to the side of sanity.

After further consultations with his wife Gāndhārī, the ever vacillating king was soon warning his son against the idea for it was bound to cause division and lead to the destruction of the kingdom. Dhṛtarāṣṭra counselled that his son, who already had so much, should not feel grief at the fortune of the Pāṇḍavas, and followed up with a forthright discourse against acquisitiveness and preached the virtues of contentment and self-control.³

But the old king, as we have seen, was no match for Duryodhana's emotive powers of persuasion. Dhṛtarāṣṭra continued to dislike his son's proposal, fearing it would let loose the swords and arrows of war, but nevertheless gave his permission: 'The words that you speak I do not deem right; (but), O king of men, let what pleases you be done. Recalling your words you shall suffer hereafter, for words of this sort are not found to accord with *dharma*.'⁴ Having said his piece, Dhṛtarāṣṭra again solaced his misgivings with the thought that it was all the doing of fate: 'After speaking so, the thoughtful (King) Dhṛtarāṣṭra deemed it (all) fate, supreme and invincible. Loudly he commanded his servants (to obey) the words of his son, (and) the king stayed (there), his

- 1) Kṣattaḥ putreṣu putrairme kalaho na bhaviṣyati/
Divi devāḥ prasādaṁ naḥ kariṣyanti na saṁçayaḥ// (53)
Açubhaṁ vā çubhaṁ vāpi hitaṁ vā yadi vāhitaṁ/
Pravartatāṁ suhrddyūtaṁ diṣṭametanna saṁçayaḥ// (54)
Mayi saṁnihite caiva bhīṣme ca bharatarṣabhe/
Anayo daivavihito na kathaṁcidbhaviṣyati// (55)
Na vāryo vyavasāyo me viduraitadbravīmi te/
Daivameva paraṁ manye yenaitadupapadyate// (57) *ibid.*, 45.53-57.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 45.58. 3) *Ibid.*, 46.7-17, 50.1-8.
- 4) Vākyam na me rocate yattvayoktaṁ
yatte priyaṁ tatkriyatāṁ narendra/
Paçcāttapsyase tadupākramya vākyam
na hīdṛçaṁ bhāvi vaco hi dharmyam// *ibid.*, 51.14.

mind stupefied by fate.'¹

When the fabulous gambling Hall had been finished, Dhṛtarāṣṭra bade Vidura bring the Pāṇḍavas to see its magnificence, and to participate in a family game of dice. Vidura, of course, remained opposed and warned of the ruin that threatened their lineage. But Dhṛtarāṣṭra absolved himself of responsibility with the argument that all acts were done at the direction of the Placer; and with an optimism based more on faith than logic, Dhṛtarāṣṭra added that he did not fear a quarrel for otherwise fate, which must here be the will of the Placer, would be opposed to the enterprise: 'O Steward, no quarrel troubles me here, (for) otherwise fate would be to the contrary. Truly, this entire world acts subject to the direction of the Placer - it is not free.'²

Now the subsequent course of events showed how well-founded Vidura's fears were, and how ill-founded Dhṛtarāṣṭra's optimism was. At least at a critical juncture Dhṛtarāṣṭra did fulfill the role more normally expected of a king. After the Pāṇḍavas had been enslaved and Draupadī molested, there was an acrimonious debate over the conundrum raised by Draupadī of whether Yudhiṣṭhira had rightly staked and lost her, or not. As the heat rose and the family division widened, terrible omens of destruction took place. As the Kuru elders called for peace, Dhṛtarāṣṭra finally did take command of the situation. Condemning Duryodhana as dull-witted (*mandabuddhe*) Dhṛtarāṣṭra praised Draupadī for her Law-like courage and proffered her boons with which she redeemed the freedom of her husbands. Dhṛtarāṣṭra then bade Yudhiṣṭhira to return in safety and well-being to their kingdom with all its wealth, and to

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- 1) Evamuktvā dhṛtarāṣṭro manīṣī
 daivaṃ matvā paramaṃ dustaraṃ ca/
 ṣaṣṭasoccaiḥ puruṣānputravākya
 sthito rājā daivasammūḍhacetāḥ// *ibid.*, 51.16.
- 2) Neha kṣattaḥ kalahastapsyate mām
 na ceddaivaṃ pratilomaṃ bhaviṣyat/
 Dhātṛā tu diṣṭasya vaḥ kiledaṃ
 sarvaṃ jagacceṣṭati na svatantram// *ibid.*, 51.25.

bear no hostility towards Duryodhana.¹ After barely restraining Bhīma, who was swearing the destruction of his enemies, the Pāṇḍavas proceeded on their way.

But Dhṛtarāṣṭra's timely intervention was soon to be undone. Arguing that the enraged Pāṇḍavas would never forgive them, Duryodhana and his supporters proposed to the king one final throw of the dice with the stake being exile in the forest. Despite the protestations of the Kuru elders, Dhṛtarāṣṭra agreed for he loved his son (*sutapriya*).² Dhṛtarāṣṭra was not alone in these sentiments, but Queen Gāndhārī, torn between her love for her son and her love for the *dharma*, came to a different conclusion. Do not, she direly warned, cause the destruction of their lineage by heeding the views of untaught children (*bālānāmaṣiṣṭānām*). Instead, Dhṛtarāṣṭra must himself take the lead in the situation, fulfilling his kingly and fatherly duty: 'Your sons must be (under) your leadership lest, broken apart, they abandon you.'³ Even to his own wife, who could see what was *dharma* (*dharma darśinīm*), Dhṛtarāṣṭra could only explain his actions in terms of what must be, and man's powerlessness: 'The end of our line must be intended, (and) I shall not be able to prevent it. So let it be as they desire. The Pāṇḍavas must return.'⁴

After the Pāṇḍavas had departed for exile, Dhṛtarāṣṭra sat alone with his faithful *sūta*, Saṃjaya, worrying and sighing much at the prospect of war with those foremost warriors, the Pāṇḍavas. Saṃjaya could offer little consolation to the troubled king, for like Vidura and Gāndhārī he laid the blame at Dhṛtarāṣṭra's feet: 'O King, this you have thoroughly achieved: there will be a great feud. The destruction of everyone, along with their followers, will take place.'⁵ Dhṛtarāṣṭra implicitly accepted that his judgement had been faulted, but chose to blame the gods for this on the grounds that it is the gods who

1) *Ibid.*, 63.22-36, 65.1-10.

2) See *ibid.*, 66.7-27.

3) Tvannetrāḥ santu te putrā mā tvām dirṇāḥ prahāsiṣuḥ// *ibid.*, 66.34.

4) Antaḥ kāmam kulasyāstu na ṇakṣyāmi nivāritum// (36)

Yatheccchanti tathaiḥvāstu pratyāḡacchantu pāṇḍavāḥ/ (37) *ibid.*, 66.36-37.

5) Tavedaṃ sukṛtaṃ rājanmahadvairaṃ bhaviṣyati/

Vināḡaḥ sarvalokasya sānubandho bhaviṣyati// *ibid.*, 72.5.

take away a man's reason:

When the gods send defeat to a man, they take away his judgement (so that) he sees matters the wrong way around. When destruction is imminent, the judgement becomes dimmed: bad conduct has the appearance of good conduct, (and) it will not move from the heart; and misfortune has the appearance of fortune, and fortune the appearance of misfortune. At the time of destruction these (misjudgements) rise up, and a man is pleased (by them). Time, raising its rod, does not cleave the head of anyone, (for) the true power of Time is causing an advantage to be seen in the wrong way.'

Throughout the long years of the Pāṇḍavas' exile the question of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's responsibility lingered on. Occasionally Dhṛtarāṣṭra berated himself for setting aside sound advice and allowing himself to be dragged along by Duryodhana's folly,² an assessment with which his charioteer continued to agree.³ Nevertheless, the effect of external forces remained an appealing explanation for his lapse. For instance, the great sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, grandfather to both the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, soon expressed his displeasure at what had happened and warned Dhṛtarāṣṭra that Duryodhana must be stopped.⁴ Dhṛtarāṣṭra explained that he, like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Vidura and Gāndhārī, did not approve of the dicing, but 'Then fate possessed me, I think, and made me do it, O hermit.'⁵ Nor did the old king feel capable of rectifying what had happened. 'O Blessed (Father), out of love for my son, I cannot abandon the foolish Duryodhana - even though I know, O observer of vows.'⁶ Seemingly aware that his duty as a king should come before his attachment as a father, Dhṛtarāṣṭra could

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- 1) Yasmai devāḥ prayacchanti puruṣāya parābhavam/
 Buddhīm tasyāpakarṣanti so apācīnāni paçyati//
 Buddhau kaluṣabhūtāyām vināçe pratyupasthite/
 Anayo nayasamkāço hṛdayānnāpasarpātī//
 Anarthāçcārtharūpeṇa arthāçcānartharūpiṇaḥ/
 Uttiṣṭhanti vināçānte naraṃ taccāsyā rocate//
 Na kālo daṇḍamudyamya çiraḥ kṛntati kasyacit/
 Kālasya balametāvadviparītārthadarçanam// *ibid.*, 72.8-11.
- 2) See *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 48.1-10, 225.8-24.
- 3) e.g. 'Out of folly, you did not check your son, though you were able.'
 (Samarthenāpi yanmohātputraste na nivāritah//) *ibid.*, 48.11.
- 4) *Ibid.*, 9.1-5.
- 5) Manye tadvidhinākramya kārīto asmīti vai mūne// *ibid.*, 10.1.
- 6) Parityaktuṃ na çaknomi duryodhanamacetanam/
 Putrasnehena bhagavañjānannapi yatavrata// *ibid.*, 10.3; cf. 48.10-11.

only explain his failing in terms of outside forces.

Perhaps the strongest condemnation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role, if only because it came from the King of Dharma, fell from the lips of the normally forgiving Yudhiṣṭhira. When Saṃjaya brought a message of peace from Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the Pāṇḍavas had finished their exile, Yudhiṣṭhira finally lost his patience, and cast aspersions on the old king's good faith. He did not now believe that Dhṛtarāṣṭra would willingly return their kingdom. Dhṛtarāṣṭra had always been partial to Duryodhana's cause, and living as he now did in luxury and splendour would only feed the old king's desire for more, not less. Having attained sovereignty, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra bewailed (*lālapyate*) the situation, but it was all of his own making for he had followed Duryodhana's ill-intentioned advice, ignoring the wise counsels of others. 'King Dhṛtarāṣṭra,' Yudhiṣṭhira concluded, 'had with full awareness entered upon *adharma* to favour his son.' Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana were striving for a great kingdom which would have no rival.²

Now Dhṛtarāṣṭra, true to past form, did not approach the impending peace negotiations in anything like a decisive frame of mind. When Vidura yet again exhorted the old king to do right by the Pāṇḍavas, Dhṛtarāṣṭra agreed with what he said but explained that when he met Duryodhana his mind turned away from the Pāṇḍavas. 'No mortal,' he lamented, 'could ever transgress destiny. Fate alone acts, I believe, and human effort is futile.'³ Dhṛtarāṣṭra felt that 'This man, like a wooden doll strung on a string, is not the master of prosperity and adversity. Assuredly he (has been placed) under the power of fate by the Ordainer.'⁴

Despite Dhṛtarāṣṭra's views on the futility of human effort, he did at least

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- 1) Sutasya rājā dhṛtarāṣṭraḥ priyaiṣī
sambudhyamāno viçate adharmameva// Udyogaparvan, 26.11.
2) *ibid.*, 26.1-19.
3) Na diṣṭamabhyatīkrāntuṃ çakyaṃ martyena kenacit/
Diṣṭameva kṛtaṃ manye pauraṣaṃ tu nirarthakam// *ibid.*, 40.30.
4) Anīçvaro ayaṃ puruṣo bhavābhavē
sūtraprotā dārumayīva yoṣā/
Dhātrā tu diṣṭasya vaçe kilāyaṃ *ibid.*, 39.1.

appeal to his sons and try to reason with them, pointing out in tones of desperation that war with the invincible Pāṇḍavas would lead to their destruction.¹ But reason lost out to recalcitrance, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra proved quite incapable of doing what his kingly duty required he do - command his sons. It is significant that when Kṛṣṇa came to the Kaurava court as a plenipotentiary envoy to arrange peace, it was to Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he first appealed, bidding him exercise the powers of control he possessed as king: 'Peace, O King, is dependent on you and on me, O lord of your people; stop your sons, O Kaurava, (and) I will restrain the others!'²

Feeling entirely powerless, Dhṛtarāṣṭra could only continue to bewail that mortal man was powerless:

I think fate alone is supreme and human effort futile since I know fully the evils of war with its consequent destruction yet I am unable to restrain my son, who is well-versed in fraud and a cheat at gambling, (and nor am I able) to act to my own profit. O *sūta*, I have the wisdom to perceive (my) sin, (but) when I come near Duryodhana (my mind) turns back again. Such being the case, O Saṁjaya, what will be, that shall be.³

Saṁjaya's comments in reply are revealing because they are impossible to reconcile. His immediate response was that Dhṛtarāṣṭra should put less blame on Duryodhana, and more importantly, less on the forces of fate: 'A man who incurs misfortune through his own ill-conduct, because of that guilt he should not blame fate or Time.'⁴ However, when Saṁjaya agrees to relate to the blind king all that should befall in the great war, he tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra to remain calm and not to grieve 'For surely man is not the doer of actions, good or evil.

1) *Ibid.*, 50.1-60, 51.1-19, 52.1-16, 56.26-27.

2) Tvayyadhīnaḥ ṣamo rājanmayi caiva viṣāṁ pate/
Putrānsthāpaya kauravya sthāpayiṣyāmyaham parān// *ibid.*, 93.13.

3) Diṣṭameva paraṁ manye pauraṣaṁ cāpyanarthakam/
Yadahaṁ jānamāno api yuddhadoṣāṅkṣayodayān//
Tathāpi nikṛtiprajñam putram durdyūtaadevinam/
Na ṣaknomi niyantum vā kartum vā hitamātmanah//
Bhavatyeva hi me sūta buddhirdoṣānudarçinī/
Duryodhanam samāsādyā punaḥ sā parivartate//
Evaṁ gate vai yadbhāvi tadbhaviṣyati saṁjaya/ *ibid.*, 156.4-7.

4) Ya ātmano duṣcaritādaṣubham prāpnuyānnarah/
Enasā na sa daivam vā kalam vā gantumarhati// *ibid.*, 156.9.

Dependent, man is made to act, like a wooden puppet on a string. Some people are directed by the Lord, some by chance, and others by previous actions; this is the triad (by which a man) is pulled along.' As the approach of the bards was invariably to add rather than delete, we may presume that Saṃjaya's inconsistency results from differing opinions concerning Dhṛtarāṣṭra's culpability. This perhaps also suggests the extent to which the Epic bards were consciously concerned with the problem of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's responsibility.²

The Epic bards seem to have devoted similar attention to the issue of Yudhiṣṭhira's participation in the dicing; and consequently his responsibility for the disasters that befell the Pāṇḍavas. Of all the characters to appear in the *Mahābhārata*, it is the name of Yudhiṣṭhira that is most readily associated with *dharma*. He is the King of Dharma, and as Draupadī acidly comments, he would forsake her and his brothers before forsaking the *dharma*.³ Yudhiṣṭhira's virtue is so great that he easily upstages Kṛṣṇa himself even though he is God incarnate. Now the King of Dharma, as we have seen, is not beyond fault, but given his almost excess of virtue Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling lapse takes on monumental proportions, and it is a problem the Epic bards could scarcely ignore.

Yudhiṣṭhira, at least, had no doubt from the very start that a family dicing would be the gravest folly. When Vidura brought Dhṛtarāṣṭra's 'invitation', Yudhiṣṭhira was much disturbed, for he knew full-well that there would be a quarrel. Yudhiṣṭhira was even more disturbed when he heard that Çakuni would

1) Keciḍiçvaranirdiṣṭāḥ kecideva yadṛcchayā/

Pūrvakarmabhirapyanye traidhametadvikṛṣyate// *ibid.*, 156.15.

2) Throughout the course of the eighteen day battle it is Saṃjaya who relates all the minute details to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. And we find, with almost monotonous regularity, some similar exchange between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Saṃjaya, or Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vyāsa regarding the efficacy of human action and fate, with Dhṛtarāṣṭra variously blaming fate, Time or the Ordainer. However, they add little that is new to the debate. cf. Bhīṣmaparvan, 3.44, 4.1-11, 9.20-21, 16.1-6, 49.1-3, 58.1-19, 72.19-26, 79.1-9, Droṇaparvan, 1.8-9, 10.47-50, 23.1-14, 61.37, 62.11-17, 110.1, 115.1-4, Karṇaparvan, 4.57, 5.29, 5.45, 22.23-28, Çalyaparvan, 2.29-41, 2.57, and so on.

3) Āraṇyakaparvan, 31.6.

also play: 'Very dangerous gamblers have been collected, gamblers who are full of deceit and trickery.' But, like Dhṛtarāṣṭra, while Yudhiṣṭhira did not like the direction of events, he felt that their flow was beyond his control. In part, the requirements of *dharma*, as Yudhiṣṭhira perceived them, compelled him towards agreement. In particular, if it was King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's command (çāsanāt), then he must agree for a son should always revere the father. As well, if he refused Çakuni would challenge him in the knowledge that Yudhiṣṭhira had pledged an eternal vow never to refuse a challenge. But there was more to it than this. For Yudhiṣṭhira, the force of circumstances was such that they could only be governed from an external source: 'But assuredly, this world is under the power of the Placer's direction - I cannot now not dice with these gamblers.'²²

A night of reflection merely strengthened Yudhiṣṭhira's feeling that events were now beyond his control. As Yudhiṣṭhira, with his brothers and retainers set off the next day, he reflected on the impotence of man and the potency of the Placer's inscrutable design: 'But fate steals our judgement, as a bright light blinds the eye. Man, bound with nooses, follows the power of the Placer.'²³

Much as Yudhiṣṭhira may have felt powerless when he entered the gaming hall, he immediately made apparent his disdain for the proceedings. Meeting Çakuni, Yudhiṣṭhira condemned the whole idea: 'Gambling is evil, a dishonesty; there is no *kṣatriya* valour here.'²⁴ No praise, he added, was to be found for the arrogance and dishonesty of the gambler, and he appealed to Çakuni to play by honest means only.²⁵ Çakuni was unrepentant for in his view what Yudhiṣṭhira felt was dishonesty (*nikṛti*) merely represented the gambler's

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- 1) Mahābhayāḥ kitavāḥ saṁniviṣṭā
māyopadhā devitāro atra santi/ Sabhāparvan, 52.14.
 - 2) Dhātrā tu diṣṭasya vaçe kiledaṁ
nādevanaṁ kitavairadya tairme// *ibid.*, 52.14.
 - 3) Daivaṁ prajñāṁ tu muṣṇāti tejaçcakṣurivāpatat/
Dhātuçca vaçamanveti pāçairiva naraḥ sitaḥ// *ibid.*, 52.18.
 - 4) Nikṛtirdevanaṁ pāpaṁ na kṣātro atra parākramaḥ/ *ibid.*, 53.2.
 - 5) *Ibid.*, 53.2-3 & 6-10.

greater skill and expertise. Seeing through an opponent's deceptions was all part of the game. Then Çakuni flung a final challenge: if Yudhiṣṭhira feared it was dishonesty, he should desist from the game.' Even after Çakuni's explanation that skill and dishonesty were one and the same, Yudhiṣṭhira could not desist for 'I have pledged the vow that (once) challenged I will not turn away: the injunction, O king, is strong. I am in the power of destiny.'²

Now, as every stake was laid, Çakuni resorted to deception (*nikṛtiṃ samupāçṛitaḥ*) and won until Yudhiṣṭhira had lost all he possessed including the freedom of he and his brothers. Perhaps more important than his material losses, Yudhiṣṭhira also lost all sense of his dignity; for, despite his initial reluctance, once the game started Yudhiṣṭhira showed certain signs of the gambler's mania to redeem what had been lost. When Çakuni won the first stake, Yudhiṣṭhira's excitation was already apparent: 'It is only through a trick on me that I have been beaten in this game. Come on Çakuni, throw the dice - we shall play a thousand times.'³ It is to be noted that Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of caution was sensed by Çakuni. When Yudhiṣṭhira, one after another, summed up the qualities of his brothers and then staked them as well, Çakuni baited him: 'O Yudhiṣṭhira, gamblers who play the dice prattle like madmen about what they have not seen asleep or awake.'⁴ Others, too, may have sensed it. When a servant was sent to fetch the enslaved Draupadī to the court, he explained to her that Yudhiṣṭhira had been intoxicated by the gambling (*dyūtamadena*).⁵

The problem of whether Yudhiṣṭhira had a choice or not in what he did arose almost immediately after his loss. For instance, even Bhīṣma, who was generally favourable to the Pāṇḍava cause, felt that Yudhiṣṭhira was at blame

1) *Ibid.*, 53.4-5 & 11-12.

2) *Āhūto na nivarteyamiti me vratamāhitam/*

3) *Mattaḥ kaitavakenaiva yajjito asmi durodaram/*
Çakune hanta dīvyāmo glahamānāḥ sahasraçaḥ// *ibid.*, 54.1.

4) *Svapne na tāni paçyanti jāgrato vā yudhiṣṭhira/*
Kitavā yāni dīvyantaḥ pralapantyutkaṭā iva// *ibid.*, 58.19.

5) *Ibid.*, 60.4.

for Çakuni had given Yudhiṣṭhira a choice.¹ But the bitterest blame came from Bhīma who vented his rage at Draupadī's molestation upon his elder brother. Bhīma was prepared to accept the loss of their vast wealth, their kingdom and their own personal freedom for Yudhiṣṭhira was the master of all they possessed; but he felt Yudhiṣṭhira had transgressed all limits when he had gambled away Draupadī. For Bhīma this was of the lowest order of deeds: 'There are, Yudhiṣṭhira, harlots in the country of gamblers - but they do not gamble with them. Even amongst them there is compassion!'² In other words, Bhīma did not object to the decision to gamble; it was the manner in which Yudhiṣṭhira had gambled that was at fault. So angered was Bhīma that he commanded his younger brother Sahadeva to bring fire with which to burn off Yudhiṣṭhira's arms. It took Arjuna's stern reproof to calm Bhīma down. Arjuna reminded Bhīma that by *dharma*, obedience to the elder brother was required. More, Arjuna argued that circumstances conspired to leave Yudhiṣṭhira no choice but to gamble, for by *kṣatriya dharma* he had to accept the challenge - although, to be fair, this was not Bhīma's complaint. Indeed, they should take pride in the fact he had abided by the *kṣatriya dharma* in accepting such a loaded challenge.³ With this view Draupadī also seemed to agree.⁴ Nevertheless, by explaining Yudhiṣṭhira's action in terms of the force of circumstances rather than fate or the Placer, the assumption remained that ultimately Yudhiṣṭhira did have a choice.

Now, after King Dhṛtarāṣṭra had returned to the Pāṇḍavas their freedom, wealth, and kingdom, Yudhiṣṭhira was soon to be given another opportunity to choose. When a servant brought King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's ominous message to return to the gaming hall, Yudhiṣṭhira again felt he had no choice. If he was to abide by the requirements of *dharma*, as he understood them, obedience to his uncle and king was called for, even if the consequences could only be disastrous.

1) *Ibid.*, 60.42.

2) Bhavanti deṣe bandhakyah kitavānām yudhiṣṭhira/
Na tābhiruta dīvyanti dayā caivāsti tās vapī// *Ibid.*, 61.1.

3) *Ibid.*, 61.7-10.

4) *Ibid.*, 60.43.

Yudhiṣṭhira explained to his brothers: 'Although knowing that the challenge to the dicing game at the command of the old (king) will bring destruction, I cannot disregard him.'¹ And so, it was 'with shame, and from attachment to *dharma*, (that) the Pārtha again went to the gambling.'² And nor again could he ignore a challenge and remain consistent with *dharma*. To Çakuni, Yudhiṣṭhira said: 'How could a king of my kind, who protects his own *dharma*, turn away when challenged. Çakuni with you I will play.'³ The difficulty for Yudhiṣṭhira was the sure knowledge that his obedience to *dharma* could only bring ruin and destruction. It is perhaps for this reason that Yudhiṣṭhira, faced with the prospect of finding fault with the *dharma*, chose to place the ultimate blame not on the force of circumstances but on the Placer who exercised power over what befell man. As they returned to the gaming, Yudhiṣṭhira intoned: 'Creatures obtain good or evil through the injunction of the Placer. (And) there will be no escape from either if again we must play.'⁴

However, Yudhiṣṭhira's explanation of his own actions did not carry conviction with everyone. During the years of their exile his sternest critics proved to be those closest to him - Bhīma and Draupadī. Periodically, the sheer frustration of their position got the better of the mighty Bhīma who was only at his happiest when destroying enemies. But once started Bhīma's exhortations to act immediately could easily give way to blaming Yudhiṣṭhira for bringing on all their hardship. *Dharma* may have required Bhīma's obedience to his elder brother, but he was wont to remind Yudhiṣṭhira: 'O King, we are not destitute of manhood and are the most powerful amongst the powerful, (yet) we all have been

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- 1) Akṣadyūte samāhvānaṃ niyogātsthavirasya ca/
Jānannapi kṣayakaraṃ nātikramitumutsahe// *ibid.*, 67.4.
2) Hriyā ca dharmasaṅgācca pārtho dyūtamīyātpunaḥ// *ibid.*, 67.15.
3) Kathaṃ vai madvidho rājā svadharmamanupālayan/
Āhūto vinivarteta dīvyāmi çakune tvayā// *ibid.*, 67.17.
4) Dhāturniyogādbhūtāni prāpnuvanti çubhāçubham/
Na nivṛttistayorasti devitavyaṃ punaryadi// *ibid.*, 67.3.

overwhelmed through the evil of your gambling.'

At particular moments of pain and distress, Draupadī also poured out her anguish, although typically her attitudes towards her husband were more complicated. We have already seen how on one occasion during their forest wanderings Draupadī was so totally mystified by Yudhiṣṭhira's solitary lapse to the 'evil passion of dicing' (*akṣavyasana*), despite his whole life and behaviour being given over to the *dharma*, that she could only explain it in terms of all actions being controlled by the Placer.² But when Draupadī was later molested and kicked by the amorous Kīcaka, while disguised as a chambermaid at King Virāṭa's court, she was much less inclined to find excuses for her husband. Burning with rage Draupadī determined herself upon Kīcaka's death, and as always it was to Bhīma that she turned when she wanted a difficult deed done. But first of all she poured forth all of her accumulated resentment at the way she had been treated in the gambling hall, and subsequently molested by the love-struck King of Sindhu, and now by Kīcaka. Thoroughly worked up, Draupadī placed the blame for all of her woes on the shoulders of her *dharma*-addicted husband. 'What pity doesn't a woman deserve who has Yudhiṣṭhira for her husband?' she asked Bhīma.³ 'Revile your eldest brother the gambler - it is his doing that I have gotten into this never-ending trouble! For who but a gambler would give up his kingdom, all property and himself, and gamble for a forest life?'⁴

Another critic of Yudhiṣṭhira, and a somewhat surprising one at that, was Kṛṣṇa's elder brother Balarāma. When Kṛṣṇa proposed the sending of an envoy to Duryodhana to persuade him to return Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom, Balarāma agreed but

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- 1) Bhavato dyūta-doṣeṇa sarve vāyamupaplutāḥ/
 Ahīnapauruṣā rājanbalibhirbalavattamāḥ// *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 49.12; cf.
Āraṇyakaparvan, 34.6-13, and *Virāṭaparvan*, 20.1-13.
 2) *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 31.1-42.
 3) Aṣocyam nu kutastasyā yasyā bhartā yudhiṣṭhiraḥ/ *Virāṭaparvan*, 17.1.
 4) Bhrātaram ca vigarhasva jyeṣṭham durdyūta Devinam/
 Yasyāsmi karmanā prāptā duḥkhametadanantakam//
 Ko hi rājyaṃ parityajya sarvasvaṃ cātmanā saha/
 Pravrajyāyaiva dīvyeta vinā durdyūta Devinam// *ibid.*, 17.10-11.

recommended the envoy adopt a humble approach for it was Yudhiṣṭhira's fault that he had lost at the gambling. Although Yudhiṣṭhira could not play he had challenged Çakuni who was without peer with the dice, and despite the warning of his friends - or so Balarāma maintained. And when the dice always favoured the other, he became excited and was soundly defeated (*saṃrambhamāṇo vijitah prasahya*).¹ For this Çakuni could not be blamed. Yudhiṣṭhira was, at least, defended by Sātyaki who flew into a rage. Yudhiṣṭhira had been challenged by skilled gamblers who, taking advantage of his devotion to *kṣatriya dharma*, had defeated him by dishonest means.²

While Sātyaki's defence was no doubt a more accurate representation of what had taken place, the difficulty was that during their exile Yudhiṣṭhira had no hesitation in holding himself to blame. Thus soon after the Pāṇḍavas had begun their journey into the Himālayas to be reunited with Arjuna, they were battered by a fierce-gale and rain-storm, whereupon Draupadī sank down in a faint from exhaustion. All the Pāṇḍavas rushed to comfort her and Yudhiṣṭhira, taking Draupadī on his lap, sorrowfully lamented that King Drupada's daughter, so beautiful and worthy, had been reduced to a state of fatigue and misery 'because of my sinner's deeds' (*pāpasya mama karmabhiḥ*):³ 'What is this I have done through my foolish desire for gambling.'⁴ Even after 12 years, during their final year in the forest, Yudhiṣṭhira still could not sleep easy as he reflected on the wickedness (*daurātmyam*) that had arisen from the gambling, and on the great suffering of his brothers which he felt was due to his own sinful deeds (*ātmakarmāparādhaḥ*).⁵

We are, then, left with a problem. Before the gaming Yudhiṣṭhira effectively absolved himself of blame; the Placer and fate, in the form of forces and circumstances quite beyond his control, compelled him to gamble. Yet after the

1) Udyogaparvan, 1.1-11.

2) *Ibid.*, 3.6-9.

3) Aranyakaparvan, 144.14.

4) Kimidaṃ dyūtakāmena mayā kṛtamabuddhinā/ *ibid.*, 144.12; see 144.10-14.

5) See *ibid.*, 245.3-4.

dicing Yudhiṣṭhira fulsomely accepted responsibility and blame. The easiest solution would be to explain the apparent inconsistency away as an anomaly of the *Mahābhārata*'s eight centuries of growth: consistency would be too much to hope for in such a text. However, the main story line of the *Mahābhārata* would seem to be more organic than many would allow. But perhaps Yudhiṣṭhira himself provides the real solution. When Bhīma, early in their exile, launches a scathing and almost bitter attack on Yudhiṣṭhira's manhood, exhorting him to break their 13 years vow forthwith and to slay their enemies, Yudhiṣṭhira reproves such anger and its consequences; and interestingly cites his own example in the gaming where he could have stopped had he not given way to anger. Now Yudhiṣṭhira did not blame Bhīma for his hostile and pointed words 'for your evil plight came from my imprudence' (*mamānayāddhi vyasanam va āgāt*).¹ Yudhiṣṭhira then explained:

Seeing the dice would conform to what Çakuni desired, even and odd, I could still have restrained myself, but anger destroys a man's calm. Dear (brother)! he who is bound by valour, pride and power cannot restrain himself. I do not bear (easily) your words, O Bhīmasena; (but) I think it was fated to be so.²

The situation for the Epic narrators, then, would seem to be as follows: while Yudhiṣṭhira had no choice but to accept the challenge to a dicing match the outcome of which was predetermined, nevertheless once it started he himself freely chose to continue participating in the disastrous fashion he did. The Placer or fate may have pushed him to the gaming floor, but once there it was

1) *Ibid.*, 35.1.

2) Akṣānhi dṛṣṭvā çakuneryathāva-
 tkāmānulomānayujo yujaçca/
 Çakyam niyantumabhaviṣyadātmā
 manyustu hanti puruṣasya dhairyam//
 Yantum nātmā çakyate pauruṣeṇa
 mānena vīryeṇa ca tāta naddhaḥ/
 Na te vācam bhīmasenābhyasūye
 manyate tathā tadbhavitavyamāsīt// *ibid.*, 35.4-5.

(Çakyam niyantumabhaviṣyadātmā: 'my nature would have been capable of being restrained', where abhaviṣyad is in the conditional tense.)

his own temporary break-down in self-control¹ that drove him on (and it is not Yudhiṣṭhira's only lapse in the *Mahābhārata*) to such a disastrous end.

From what has been said, the conclusion again follows that while some events are predetermined by God or fate, not all are. On the question of human responsibility, some Epic narrators would seem to have given careful thought to the problem of human freedom of action in the face of fate and divine interference, before finding a place for both.

1) We may note that Yudhiṣṭhira chose to spend the thirteenth year of exile disguised as the royal gamester at the court of King Virāṭa. The choice is perhaps not as strange as it might first seem for the seer Bṛhadāçva had bestowed on Yudhiṣṭhira the entire knowledge of dicing to remove his fear of again being challenged by a skilled dicer. (Aranyakaparvan, 78.14-15) Now, after Virāṭa's victories over the cattle-raiding Trigartas and Kurus, the king called upon Yudhiṣṭhira for a game of dice. But Yudhiṣṭhira cautioned that the king was too excited: 'One should not play, we have heard, with an excited gambler.' (Na devitavyaṃ hr̥ṣṭena kitaveneti naḥ çrutam// Virāṭaparvan, 63.30) Yudhiṣṭhira, we may suspect, knew at first hand all about the dangers of being excited at gambling.

Chapter 5: The *Bhagavadgītā*

The *Bhagavadgītā* is merely one of the hundreds of didactic sections to be found embedded in the great bulk of the *Mahābhārata*. Formally it is *smṛti* literature, at a lower level than the *ṛguti* literature of the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*. Nevertheless, without doubt it is the pre-eminent piece of literature in the developed Hindu tradition.

There would seem to be a number of reasons why the *Gītā* has emerged out of the tangled mass of the *Mahābhārata* to a position of such importance. In part, the *Gītā* purports to be the direct word of God himself, a claim that cannot be made in the same way for the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*.¹ Admittedly Kṛṣṇa, or God incarnate, has much else to say in the *Mahābhārata*, but in the *Gītā* alone does Kṛṣṇa expound his most secret message concerning his love for man. In the heat of battle Arjuna quite forgets this message. But when he asks Kṛṣṇa for a repeat, Kṛṣṇa merely rehashes the well-worn knowledge that Bhīṣma relates at such length in the *Çāntiparvan* and *Anuṣāsanaparvan*. In the *Mahābhārata*, God's highest message will be presented only once.² As befits God's word, the appeal of the *Gītā* was to transcend time, and it is this that explains its true importance. The religious and ethical teachings offered by the *Gītā* have been considered by all times to be of abiding value.

However, as well as its 'timeless message' the importance of the *Gītā* is partly explained by the historical purpose that brought it forth, and the significance of this should not be ignored. The date of the *Bhagavadgītā* cannot be fixed with absolute certainty, but on the basis of external and internal evidence, most scholars accept that a date of the third to the first century B.C. would not be too far wrong.³ The time at which the author(s) of the *Gītā*

1) J.A.B. van Buitenen, 'Vedic and Upaniṣadic Bases of Indian Civilisation' in J.W. Elder (ed.) *Chapters in Indian Civilisation*, vol.1, p.3.

2) R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā, with a Commentary based on the Original Sources*, pp.6-7.

3) For instance, J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata*, p.6; R.S.J. de Smet, 'A Copernican Reversal: The Gītākāra's Reformulation of Karma',

wrote¹ was a period of great religious division and dispute which saw the orthodox brāhmaṇical tradition under very serious challenge from competing heterodox religious systems. Whatever the precise details of the crisis for the orthodox faith, the widespread allegiance to and political support of rival systems would indicate that the brāhmaṇical system no longer adequately catered for the needs and problems of large sections of society. Adjustments were needed if the orthodox faith was to just retain its position, let alone reassert its dominance. These adjustments were not slow in coming; and this is indicated by the amount of orthodox literature that was written and rewritten in the period from approximately the fourth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D., a period in which the developed Hindu tradition was to emerge.²

Thus, one way of looking at the *Gītā* is to consider it as an integral part of the attempt by the orthodox tradition to meet the contemporary crisis in faith. The primary and immediate purpose of the author of the *Gītā* was to find a solution to a pressing religious problem.

This purpose is implicit in the very setting of the *Gītā*. God's revelation is set at the most critical moment of the entire *Mahābhārata*. All attempts to avert fratricidal conflict have failed; and the mighty Kaurava and Pāṇḍava armies are face to face ready to commence what will amount to the destruction of the known world. Kṛṣṇa is now decided: the enemies of the Pāṇḍavas are his enemies and they must be destroyed. The principal instrument for their destruction, and the fulfillment of the divine intention,³ stands at his side in the form of the invincible warrior Arjuna. However, though Arjuna is the bravest of the brave amongst *kṣatriyas*, the scene before him suddenly fills him with human pity.⁴ Seeing fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers,

Philosophy East and West, vol.27 no.1 (1977), p.53; R.C. Minor, Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary, pp.xliii-xlix.

1) While the question of the authorship of the *Gītā* need not detain us, the impression of this writer is that it is very substantially from the one pen.

2) T.J. Hopkins, The Hindu Religious Tradition, pp.52-63.

3) See *Bhagavadgītā* (hereafter Bh.G.) 11.33. 4) Bh.G. 1.28.

fathers-in-law and friends arrayed against each other,' Arjuna laments that no good could come from a victory if it was at the price of slaying one's kin. They were, he thought, determined to commit this 'great evil' (*mahatpāpaṃ*) merely 'out of greed for kingship and pleasure' (*rājyasukhalobhena*).²

So troubled is Arjuna that he proceeds to question that most sacred of all orthodox concerns - the *dharma*. Fratricidal conflict, he argues, with its consequent destruction of the eternal family *dharma* (*kuladharmāḥ sanatanāḥ*) would ultimately only stop at the destruction of all *dharma*, and the ordered hierarchic society which it underpinned. And those who destroyed the family *dharma* would surely go to hell. Would it not be better, asked Arjuna, to let the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra slay him without offering any resistance?³ Certainly it would be better to live on alms begged of others than to slay one's spiritual teachers.⁴

Arjuna's doubts cannot be set aside with appeals to the time honoured arguments of the duty and honour of a *kṣatriya*, for Arjuna's individual crisis reflects the crisis facing orthodoxy at the time. Should the individual fulfill his social duties or *dharma*, however extreme the situation, despite the fact that by the law of karma all actions (good and bad) carried consequences that would require future rebirths to come to fruition? Or should he, as the heterodox thinkers maintained, shrug off all social duties with their consequent bondage, and retire to the forest to lead the life of a mendicant intent on finding 'liberation' from all rebirth? Arjuna's problem is society's problem, and this Kṛṣṇa implicitly recognises in his teaching.

The historical concerns of the *Gītā*'s author, it is worth noting, are also implicit in his presentation and style. The author's audience was not just the restricted and learned circles who had access to the Vedic literature (including the *Upaniṣads*), but also the ordinary religious believer. The inclusion of the

1) Bh.G. 1.26-27.

3) Bh.G. 1.40-46.

2) Bh.G. 1.45.

4) Bh.G. 2.5.

Gītā in the *Mahābhārata* itself is a sure indication of this. Just as the *gramaṇa* teachers proceeded on foot taking their message to people both high and low, so would the *Gītā*'s message be transmitted to people of all standings by means of India's wandering bards. This may also help to explain the methods by which the author of the *Gītā* presents his views. Though it was a time of great religious division, the way of the *Gītā*'s author was altogether more subtle than that of open argument and disputation. Instead, he freely uses the ideas and terminology of other systems of belief (both rival and traditional), while quietly reinterpreting them to promote his own views, and qualifying or rejecting the original meaning of the other. The method is very subtle, and for his intended audience, no doubt much more effective.

Clearly, too, the message of the *Gītā* was designed to appeal to the religious and emotional instincts of even the most ordinary believer; it is not an intellectual exercise in presenting a reasoned and philosophically watertight argument. The text is written from the heart and not the intellect; and this is just what the situation required. Thus, in any consideration of the *Gītā*, it seems important to keep in mind not just its timeless message, but also the historical concerns that brought it forth.

For Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's doubts and confusions about duty and action are based, at the broadest level, upon a mistaken view of Reality. In the remainder of the *Gītā* it is Kṛṣṇa's task to reveal to Arjuna a new way of looking at and thinking about Reality. The vision that Kṛṣṇa reveals is very much that of an organic whole. Within this framework Kṛṣṇa is essentially and directly concerned with certain particular aspects: the preservation of *dharma*, the nature of man and human action, the nature of God, and the relationship of man to God and of God to man. Nevertheless, Kṛṣṇa necessarily touches on many other subjects which are of only peripheral concern to his major teachings. One of these is the problem of predestination and free-will. Indeed, it might be suggested that this

would be a peculiarly difficult problem for God to directly consider. Nevertheless, the problem will just not go away. For instance, one of the essential prerequisites of ethical or moral action (and *dharma* is a principal concern for Kṛṣṇa) is that the individual should be free to choose between alternative courses of action open, and should be responsible for the choices made. And, as we have seen, the basic framework of the *Gītā* concerns just such a moral conundrum: should Arjuna fight, as duty demands, in a war that will entail the death of his own relations, elders and teachers?

However, the failure of the *Gītā*'s author to directly consider the problem of predestination and free-will has not deterred more recent writers from offering us the *Gītā*'s solution. Thus, some writers admit God's overwhelming might but argue that this does not exclude all free-will on the part of man.¹ Others argue that God's determining power in the *Gītā* is complete; the individual is compelled and quite devoid of any free choice.² Yet other writers offer a compromise of sorts. Man is ultimately compelled by God, but may mitigate the effects of this compulsion, by freely choosing to follow or act out the divine will.³

It must be reiterated, though, that the author of the *Gītā* does not directly concern himself with the problem. While this need not necessarily deter us from seeking the *Gītā*'s solution to the problem, it does make it more likely that instead of the answer being A or B or C and so on, it is much more likely, by default as it were, that the answer will be A and B and C. In other words, supporters of all sides of the problem could put together from the *Gītā*'s verses a reasonable case for their position. An examination of the *Gītā*'s vision of Reality, more particularly as it appertains to the problem of predestination

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- 1) S.K. Maitra, The Spirit of Indian Philosophy, p.121.
 - 2) K.N. Jayatilleke, 'Some Aspects of *Gītā* and Buddhist Ethics', University of Ceylon Review, vol. 13 (1955), pp.137-141.
 - 3) de Smet, op.cit., pp.62-3; Minor, op.cit., pp.490-1; R.C. Zaehner, Concordant Discord, p.145.

and free-will, will show how this can be done.

Essential to the *Gītā's* solution to the contemporary crisis in orthodoxy was the assertion of a substantially new vision of Reality which combined the great popular interest in personal anthropomorphic gods with the abstract speculations - on the essential nature of man and the ultimate principle of the universe - of the Indian intellectual and philosophical tradition as found notably in the *Upaniṣads* and the developing classical schools of Indian philosophy. This promotion of popular theism, or the putting of an all-powerful personal God back into the austere and impersonal universe of the orthodox brāhmanical tradition, was possibly the *Gītā's* most significant contribution to the emergence of the developed Hindu tradition.¹

Throughout the *Gītā*, the author is at pains to build up and promote the importance of this personal God. However, the full importance and power of Kṛṣṇa is only revealed gradually in the *Gītā*, though ever more insistently in the second half of the text. In the earlier chapters of the *Gītā* the vision of Reality there revealed is much more obviously indebted to the orthodox intellectual and philosophical tradition.

While the *Upaniṣads*, the main exemplar of this early intellectual tradition, do not offer any systematic or very consistent conclusions on the ultimate questions concerning the nature of man and the universe with which they are principally concerned, they do at least explore the varied range of possibilities. Order was eventually brought to these Upaniṣadic speculations when they were systematised into the six orthodox schools of philosophy. The *Gītā*, itself, was compiled some time after the classical *Upaniṣads*, which it freely draws upon, and some time before these schools of philosophy had fully developed their theories, articulated their differences, and mounted their barricades.

1) The Vedic deities, riotous as their behaviour may have been, were never truly anthropomorphic.

Though the later *Vedāntin* or monistic school of philosophy was to claim the *Gītā* for its own, a claim which has received much acceptance from commentators and translators down through the ages, the *Gītā*'s explanation of Reality owes much more to the dualistic theories current at the time.¹

The early chapters of the *Gītā*, in particular, are avowedly dualistic with Reality being composed of two seemingly separate and eternal principles - *Prakṛti* or Nature, and *Puruṣa* or Spirit. However, as we shall see, these dualistic categories - eternal though they may be - are ultimately bridged by subordinating them to an all-powerful personal God in whose unifying body they merely form separate parts.

For the *Bhagavadgītā*, *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are diametrically opposite states of being. Broadly speaking, *Prakṛti* is the material world of never-ending time and infinite space, with its endless diversity and unceasing change. It is the material world that creatures, in their ignorance, can only too readily perceive and become intoxicated with, believing that there is only this and nothing else to existence.

While *Prakṛti* is diverse and complex, it is easy to comprehend and experience. By contrast, *Puruṣa* is in essence simple, but difficult to know. Even Kṛṣṇa seems better at saying what it is not, rather than what it is. In negative terms, it is a state of existence that is quite beyond time, space, and change. If *Prakṛti* is the never-ending flux of existence, *Puruṣa* is eternally immutable and unchanging. It may be said to be the permanent mode of existence that

1) The *Gītā* even cites the approaches of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* which were to become the names of the two great dualist schools of philosophy. But at the time of the *Gītā* these terms would certainly have referred to broad methods of approach to the understanding of Reality rather than to systematic schools of philosophy. Thus, in the *Gītā*, *Sāṃkhya* refers to the method of realising Reality by means of reflection and 'right (i.e. dualist) knowledge', while *Yoga* refers to the method of realising Reality through disciplined contemplation or meditation. In practice, each commends both approaches, but with differing emphasis and importance. See Minor, *op.cit.*, pp.58-9; and P. Chakravarti, *Origin and Development of the Sāṃkhya System of Thought*, pp.42-64.

creatures ultimately aspire to when faced with the remorseless and unceasing creation and destruction of *Prakṛti*.

It is Arjuna's ignorance of this state of existence that in part lies behind his dilemma; and appropriately enough the first major area of instruction that Kṛṣṇa introduces Arjuna to is the nature of the *dehīn*.¹ Kṛṣṇa reveals that Arjuna's fears are groundless for the human form consists not just of a psychosomatic organism exhibiting all the characteristics of *Prakṛti*, but also of an immortal and imperishable soul, which has all the characteristics of *Puruṣa*. It is this unknown spiritual core in man which is the true self, not the ephemeral psychosomatic sheathing of *Prakṛti*.

Therefore, Kṛṣṇa explains, all the forms that Arjuna sees arrayed on the field of battle are no more than the current temporal bodies of the eternal imperishable soul.² These great warriors could not ultimately be slain for their souls were quite beyond birth and destruction. The psychosomatic body alone was subject to the constraints of *Prakṛti*. As for its inner core: 'It is never born nor does it ever die. It never came to be, nor will it ever not be. Unborn, perpetual, eternal and ancient, it is not slain when the body is slain.'³

For the soul, it is its sad fate to become bonded to this psychosomatic body. To the extent that the soul or *dehīn* is bonded to the mortal body, it is subject to all the movements and vagaries of Nature. And when the body, under the impact of time and change, finally decays, the imperishable soul merely transmigrates to a new *deha* and continues its bondage to Nature. 'As a man leaves behind worn-out garments (and) puts on other new ones, so the embodied

1) In the *Gītā*, the immortal soul is most often referred to as the *ātman* or *dehīn* (the embodied one), the latter term indicating the soul's imprisoned state in the body.

2) Bh.G. 2.18.

3) Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin
 nāyaṃ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ/
 Ajo nityaḥ ṣaṣvatoyaṃ purāṇo
 na hanyate hanyamāne ṣarīre// Bh.G. 2.20.

(soul) leaves behind aged bodies (and) attains other new ones.'¹

However, though bonded to the world of *Prakṛti* through body after body, the soul itself is never limited by the restrictions that time and space place upon the body. As Kṛṣṇa explains, 'It is indivisible, unburnable, unwettable, and undryable; eternal, omnipresent, fixed, unmoving (and) ever-lasting.'² In particular, *sarvagataḥ* ('going everywhere, omnipresent') suggests that though the *dehīn* is associated with the body it is not confined to it; just as *nityaḥ* ('eternal') and *sanātanaḥ* ('everlasting') indicate it is not limited by time.

Equally, the embodied soul remains eternally at rest, though bonded to a body subject to ceaseless change. On this, for the *Gītā*, important point, there is repeated insistence: the soul is neither subject to change nor a cause of change. In essence, the soul is static and passive. At one point the *Gītā* illustrates this strikingly, portraying the soul as sitting inside the body - here referred to as a city with nine gates - in full control but without working: 'Renouncing all acts with the mind, the embodied (soul) sits, comfortable and in control within the nine-gated city, neither acting at all nor causing action.'³ Work and action, as we shall consider at length below, are the preserve of the *deha* and Nature.⁴

1) Vāsāṁsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya
navāni gṛhṇāti naro aparāṇi/
Tathā ṇirāṇi vihāya jīrṇāny
anyāni saṁyāti navāni dehī// Bh.G. 2.22.

2) Acchedyoyamadāhyoyamakledyoṣṣya eva ca/
Nityaḥ sarvagataḥ sthāṇuracaloyaṁ sanātanaḥ// Bh.G. 2.24.

3) Sarvakarmāṇi manasā saṁnyasyāste sukhaṁ vaçī/
Navadvāre pure dehī naiva kurvanna kārayan// Bh.G. 5.13.

4) Compare Bh.G. 5.14: 'The Lord (of the body) produces in people neither agency nor acts, nor the association of the fruit with its acts; innate nature initiates (these).'

Na kartṛtvaṁ na karmāṇi lokasya sṛjati prabhūḥ/
Na karmaphalasaṁyogaṁ svabhāvastu pravartate//
However, with seeming inconsistency, at one point the *Gītā* does allot the embodied soul the function of 'experiencing' (*bhoktṛtva*). (See Bh.G. 13.20) This may suggest that in mystical, if not logical, terms the soul is not absolutely distinct from the psychosomatic body. Or more plausibly, just as the soul may be 'fooled' by the 'ego' (*ahaṁkāra*) into the false belief that it acts, so may it be fooled into the delusion that it experiences. See F. Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā: or Song of the Blessed One*, pp.41-42.

What the *Gītā* has so far had to say about *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*, the *dehin* and its state of bondage, is by no means original. The *Gītā*'s views fall comfortably within the speculative tradition of the *Upaniṣads* and the developing dualist schools of Indian philosophy. The originality of the *Gītā* lies in its introduction into this framework of a category largely unknown to the classical *Upaniṣads* and the orthodox schools of philosophy - an all-powerful personal God.¹

Whereas the dualism of the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools of thought, and of parts of the *Upaniṣads*, is premised on the absolute distinction between *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*, this is not ultimately the position of the *Gītā*. For both Spirit and Nature are considered to be a part of the 'body' of the *Gītā*'s God; and this Arjuna literally sees in the tremendous vision of Kṛṣṇa's supernatural form in chapter 11.

This is not to say that *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* are in any sense created by God. *Puruṣa*, in fact, is specifically described as 'beginningless' (*anādi*)² and 'eternal' (*nitya*);³ but its dependent position as a part of God's form is made quite clear. 'In the world of the living, a particle of Me becomes the soul eternal. It draws (to itself) the (five) senses - with the mind as the sixth - which are a part of Nature.'⁴ It seems significant that Spirit is here described not as God (as the monists would require) but merely as a part (*aṅga*) of God, which in turn becomes bonded to Nature. It also follows that Spirit is not single and indivisible (again, as the monists would require) but multiple in form, as the later dualist *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools postulated. There are, then, numerous *Puruṣas* or spiritual monads, all eternal, and all parts of God, which

1) While the *Yoga* School does accept the existence of God, the *Īcvara* is merely a special sort of spiritual monad that has never been entangled in matter. It is quite apart from *Prakṛti* and the other *Puruṣas*, and they are in no sense a part of it. See M. Hiriyanna, *Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, pp.124-5.

2) Bh.G. 13.19.

3) Bh.G. 2.24.

4) *Mamaivāṅgo jīvaloke jīvabhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ/*

Manahsaṣṭhānīndriyāṇi prakṛtisthāni karṣati// Bh., 15.7.

become entrapped in *Prakṛti*.

The *Gītā* also makes it abundantly clear that this union of Spirit and Nature is willed by and brought about by God. The origin of the soul's bondage is thus described in overtly sexual tones, with Kṛṣṇa as the male principle and Nature as the ever-fertile female:

Great *Brahman* (i.e. Nature) is my womb; in it I place the seed (and) thence is the origin of all beings, O Bhārata. The forms which arise in all wombs, O Kaunteya, of these great *Brahman* is the womb, (and) I am the father who bestows the seed.¹

In this description Kṛṣṇa is not just the father, and the seed (i.e. the soul); for elsewhere the *Gītā* makes clear what is here suggested – Kṛṣṇa is also the maternal womb or mother.² However, the *Gītā* does not talk of one material Nature or *Prakṛti* (as do the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools), but of two, both of which are dependent parts of God. As Kṛṣṇa explains it to Arjuna:

Earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, intellect and ego – this is my eightfold divided Nature. This is (my) lower (Nature); but different to this know my higher Nature, which becomes souls, O strong-armed Prince, (and) by which this world is maintained. Be aware (that) all beings (have their) origin in these (Natures). I am the origin and dissolution of the whole world.³

Here Kṛṣṇa's 'lower Nature' evidently refers to *Prakṛti* as it has been discussed above (and as more or less described by the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools). Kṛṣṇa's 'higher Nature' has been the subject of some discussion,⁴ but can be reasonably taken to refer to the totality of individual souls or *puruṣas* that are bonded in Nature. The actual meaning depends on the precise rendering of *jīva bhūtāṃ*. *Jīva*

- 1) Mama yonirmahadbrahma tasmiṅgarbhaṃ dadhāmyaham/
Sambhavaḥ sarva bhūtānāṃ tato bhavati bhārata//
Sarvayoniṣu kaunteya mūrtayaḥ sambhavanti yāḥ/
Tāsāṃ brahma mahadyonirahaṃ bījapadaḥ pitā// Bh.G. 14.3-4.
- 2) At Bh.G. 9.17 Kṛṣṇa describes Himself as both the father and the mother of the world.
- 3) Bhūmirāponalo vāyuḥ khaṃ mano buddhireva ca/
Ahaṃkāra itīyaṃ me bhinnā prakṛtirāṣṭadhā//
Apāreya mitastvanyāṃ prakṛtiṃ viddhi me parāṃ/
Jīva bhūtāṃ mahābāho yayedam dhāryate jagat//
Etaḍyonīni bhūtāni sarvāṇītyupadhāraya/
Ahaṃ kṛtsnasya jagataḥ prabhavaḥ pralayaṣṭathā// Bh.G. 7.4-6.
- 4) See Minor, op.cit., pp.240-1, and Zaehner, op.cit., p.245.

may generally refer to the life principle, but more specifically it normally refers to the individual soul as opposed to the universal soul. Thus 'become souls' seems the most appropriate rendering. And as individual life is dependent on the combination of Spirit and Matter, then if *jīva bhūtāṁ* is what maintains the world, it should follow that Kṛṣṇa's 'higher Nature' refers to souls bonded in Nature. Those souls that have attained liberation or *mokṣa* would therefore be excluded. Whatever the case, it is evident that for the triple-world to be kept in being involves both Kṛṣṇa's higher Nature and lower Nature.¹ It is equally evident that, in the *Gītā*, Nature and Spirit are not considered to be categories independent of God; they are both a part of God's form, yet eternally distinct.

However, God remains more than the sum of His two Natures. In His supernatural form He remains beyond or other than them.² As such Kṛṣṇa is often described as the origin and destruction of the universe as we know it.³ It should not be thought that this implies that Kṛṣṇa is the 'creator' of Spirit and Matter in the strict sense of the term. Rather, it is Kṛṣṇa who causes the evolution or emanation of the triple-world.

In the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* system *Prakṛti* is in its essence a single primal substance which, with the bonded *puruṣas*, evolves through some internal dynamic into the physical universe with all its diversity, before dissolving back into the primal state. This cyclical process is repeated endlessly.⁴ Truly can it be said that the chief characteristic of *Prakṛti* is ceaseless flux.

In the *Gītā*, too, *Prakṛti* evolves ceaselessly in this cyclical fashion, a

1) It is worth noting that in the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools, it would be quite inappropriate to use the term *Prakṛti* to refer to anything to do with Spirit. The *Gītā*'s looseness on this point would again suggest that the author is not out to present a systematic and reasoned philosophy.

2) cf. Bh.G. 10.42.

3) cf. Bh.G. 7.6.

4) See Hīriyanna, *op.cit.*, pp.107-13.

process which is compared to that of a day and a night of Brahmā.

At the coming of day all manifestations come forth from the Unmanifest; at the coming of night they dissolve there in that called the Unmanifest. Coming to be again and again, this community of beings - powerless - dissolves at the coming of night, O son of Prthā, to come forth (anew) at the coming of day.¹

However, whereas the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* schools pay little attention to the impetus behind this evolution, in the *Gītā* all is ascribed to God. As Kṛṣṇa describes the process:

At the end of an aeon, all beings enter into my Nature; at the beginning of an aeon, I send them forth anew. Relying on my own Nature, I send forth again and again this whole powerless multitude of beings through the power of my Nature.²

Thus it is the control of Kṛṣṇa, in His supernatural form, over His own two Natures that explains the evolution of *Prakṛti*. Again, it is implicit in this that Kṛṣṇa is more than just the sum of His two Natures.

In the *Gītā*, when *Prakṛti* evolves from the 'Unmanifest', it seems to differentiate itself largely in accord with the *Sāṃkhya*-*Yoga* scheme of categories. According to this scheme the evolution of the manifest from the primal state of rest takes place in the following order. First there comes forth the 'intellect' or 'consciousness' called the *buddhi* or *mahat*; and from the *buddhi* there evolves the *ahaṃkāra* or 'ego', the principle of individuality; and from the *ahaṃkāra* there evolves two groups of categories. On the one hand there proceeds the *manas* or mind, the five organs of sense, and the five 'motor' organs (speech, handling, walking, evacuation, and reproduction); and on the other hand there are the five subtle elements, that is, the objects of the five senses, and from these emerge the five gross elements - space or ether, air, fire, water

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- 1) Avyaktādvyaktayaḥ sarvāḥ prabhavantyaharāgame/
Rātryāgame pralīyante tatraivāvyaktasamjñake//
Bhūtagrāmaḥ sa evāyaṃ bhūtvā bhūtvā pralīyate
Rātryāgame avaçaḥ pārtha prabhavatyaharāgame// Bh.G. 8.18-19.
 - 2) Sarvabhūtāni kaunteya prakṛtiṃ yānti māmikām/
Kalpakṣaye punastāni kalpādaḥ viśṛjāmyaham//
Prakṛtiṃ svāmavaṣṭabhya viśṛjāmi punaḥ punaḥ/
Bhūtagrāmamimam kṛtsnamavaçaṃ prakṛtervaçāt// Bh.G. 9.7-8.

and earth.

This is referred to as primary evolution. Further secondary transformations of the gross elements produce all the diverse objects (trees, animals, bodies etc.) of existence. But these secondary transformations merely represent varying combinations of the gross elements, not new principles or categories (*tattvāntara*) in the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* system.¹

Though the debt of the author of the *Gītā* to this scheme is apparent enough, nevertheless he is not at all concerned with describing the process of evolution, or even in listing the manifested categories with any real exactitude. The most detailed account of these manifested categories is provided when the 'field' (*kṣेत्रम्*) or psychosomatic body is said to consist of 'The gross elements, the ego, the intellect and also the Unmanifest, the eleven senses, and the five (sense objects) relating to the senses.'² Here the 'eleven senses' include the five senses, the *manas*, and the five organs of action (hands, feet, voice, genitals, and anus);³ while the Unmanifest simply refers to *Prakṛti* in its primal state. Thus are all the evolved categories of *Prakṛti* in the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* list mentioned in the one spot, save for the five subtle elements.⁴

It is within the framework of this vision of Reality that the *Gītā* gives consideration to what for it - and for contemporary orthodoxy - is a pressing concern: the nature of human action. Now, as we have seen, the *Gītā* insists quite remorselessly that the individual soul (i.e. Spirit) neither acts nor

1) See Hiriyanna, *op.cit.*, pp.110-13.

2) Mahābhūtānyahamkāro buddhiravyaktameva ca/
Indriyāṇi daṣaikaṃ ca pañca cendriyagocarāḥ// Bh.G. 13.5.

3) See Minor, *op.cit.*, p.382, and Zaehner, *op.cit.*, p.336.

4) The *Gītā* provides an even less exact account when describing Kṛṣṇa's 'lower Nature': 'Earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, intellect and ego - this is my eightfold divided Nature. This is (my) lower (Nature)...' Bh.G. 7.4-5. Elsewhere, too, the *Gītā* provides a hierarchy of the elements which make up the human being that conforms with the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* scheme: 'The senses, they say, are higher (than their objects); the mind is higher than the senses; the intellect is higher than the mind; but what is above the intellect is he (the soul).'

Indriyāṇi parāṇyāhurindriyebhyaḥ param manah/

Manasastu parā buddhīryo buddheḥ paratastu saḥ// Bh.G. 3.42.

changes. In essence it is static and passive; it is no agent of action. Action and agency are reserved to the sphere of Nature. Translated to the level of individual living beings, this means that action and change occur through the medium of the psychosomatic body with its organs of action, its organs of sense, and its discriminating and mental faculties. However, to the extent that the *Gītā* considers the human psychosomatic body involved in action in any detail, it considers this principally within the context of the attainment of 'liberation' (*mokṣa*) from the bondage of *Prakṛti*.

The *Gītā*, true to its Upaniṣadic heritage,¹ takes a very pessimistic view of the evolved world of *Prakṛti*. The combination of time and change is a mere formula for suffering, and when added to the fact of transmigration it is a formula for never-ending suffering. Given this, it is natural that the highest element in the human form is deemed to be the timeless, immortal and immutable soul, which by definition is beyond suffering. Therefore, it is the soul alone which deserves the accolade of being the only true self in man. The problem for Arjuna (and for man) is that in his ignorance he identifies his true self with the ever-changing and mortal psychosomatic body; and he suffers along with its suffering. Therefore, the challenge for the individual is to transfer his sense of identity from the mortal false self to the immortal true self that lies unknown at his core. This done an individual realises that in his essence he is free and immortal and has eternally been so; and thus does he overcome the suffering of *Prakṛti*. Therefore, for the *Gītā* (and for much of Indian thought), the main purpose of human action in this world is to escape from *Prakṛti*.

For the attainment of 'liberation' the *Gītā* commends at length three broad approaches: *jñānayoga* or the discipline of knowledge, *karmayoga* or the discipline of action, and *bhaktiyoga* or the discipline of devotion. However, as we shall see, these are not separate and mutually exclusive approaches. In the

1) See F. Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā: or Song of the Blessed One, p.29.

Gītā they are all inter-related. But the important thing to note is that they all assume, implicitly and explicitly, the importance of human exertion, and the efficacy of human action. However, as we shall see, the emphasis placed on the importance of human action varies considerably.

In its discussion of *jñānayoga* there is nothing particularly original in the *Gītā*, and its allegiance to Upaniṣadic thought is quite apparent. In the *Upaniṣads*, salvation is premised on the belief that the principal hope for release from the endless succession of rebirths is by 'knowledge' or intuitive realisation of the supreme metaphysical truth.¹ The *Gītā*, too, accepts that by 'correct knowledge' the individual can control his destiny and achieve 'liberation'. The power of knowledge is highlighted in many verses. Thus does Kṛṣṇa exhort Arjuna: 'Therefore, cut this doubt abiding in your heart, which arises from ignorance, with the sword of knowledge; betake yourself to *yoga*, and stand up, O Bhārata.'² And Kṛṣṇa further adds: 'Even if you are the most sinful of all sinners, by the boat of knowledge alone, you will cross over all wickedness.'³ The nature of this 'correct knowledge' is variously defined in the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Gītā*, too, has its own particular view. 'Correct knowledge' in the *Gītā* means religious truth as revealed by Kṛṣṇa; and for 'liberation' from *Prakṛti* this at the minimum means intuitive realisation of the distinction between Spirit and Nature, and that a 'particle' of Spirit lies at the very core of one's being. Ultimately the individual is 'liberated' from the effects of time and change through the knowledge that one's true self is eternally beyond time and change. This 'knowledge' must be intuitive knowledge, and not mere academic knowledge, so that one's entire being and way of existence are changed as a result.

1) *Ibid.*, pp.17-29.

2) *Tasmāda jñāna-sambhūtaṃ hṛt-sthaṃ jñānāsinātmanah/*
Chittvainaṃ saṃcayaṃ yogamātiṣṭhotttiṣṭha bhārata// Bh.G. 4.42.

3) *Api cedasi pāpebhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāpakṛttamaḥ/*
Sarvaṃ jñāna-plavenaiva vṛjinaṃ saṃtariṣyasi// Bh.G. 4.36. Also cf. Bh.G. 4.10, 4.19, 4.37-42, 5.15-17, 15.10.

However, given the nature of the psychosomatic body, the *Gītā* generally portrays this as a most daunting task. As we have seen, the evolved human being consists of a hierarchy of elements. The most important element - ultimately the only element of importance - is the soul. This particle of eternity is in turn held in bondage by a material psychosomatic body consisting of intellect, ego, mind, senses and organs of activity. However, if *mokṣa* is to be attained this instrument of bondage must be converted into an instrument of liberation by means of the individuals own exertions. But for the *Gītā*, the main villain in the piece seems to be the senses which relate the individual to the ever-enticing world of *Prakṛti*. They thus blind the higher mental faculties to the particle of Spirit within, and fix them on the ephemeral pleasures of *Prakṛti*. The *Gītā* portrays the seduction of the senses in extremely strong terms, and the consequences for the psychosomatic body as being quite disastrous.

When a man thinks about the objects of sense, attachment to them is born. From attachment is born desire; from desire is born anger. From anger there arises delusion; from delusion, disturbance of the memory; from disturbance of the memory, destruction of the intellect; (and) from the destruction of the intellect, one is lost.¹

Thus attachment to the objects of sense leads to a chain of consequences which results in 'disturbance of memory' (presumably the forgetting of the true soul), the 'destruction' of the intellect, and therefore the ultimate loss of the individual from the point of view of *mokṣa*.

Therefore, either attachment to the objects of sense is ended or all hope of *mokṣa* is lost. The task of controlling the senses is allotted to the next highest faculty in the body, the *manas* or mind.² It is the *manas* which gathers

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- 1) Dhyāyato viṣayānpuṁsaḥ saṅgasteṣūpajāyate/
 Saṅgātsamjāyate kāmāḥ kāmātkrodho abhijāyate//
 Krodhādbhavati saṁmohaḥ saṁmohātsmṛtīvibhramāḥ/
 Smṛtibhraṇṇādbuddhināṣo buddhināṣātpranaṣyati// Bh.G. 2.62-63.
- 2) 'Renounce completely all desires which arise from determination, (and) curb in every way the host of senses by mind alone.' Bh.G. 6.24.
 Saṁkalpaprabhavāṅkāmāṇstyaktvā sarvānaṣeṣataḥ/
 Manasaivendriyagrāmaṁ viniyamya samantataḥ// Also cf. Bh.G. 3.7.

in and processes the perceptions or data collected by the senses,¹ and which would seem to be the location of memory.² However, the *Gītā* does not see this as an easy task for the senses are strong, and the mind is weak. As Kṛṣṇa warns: 'For the mind, which is guided by the roving senses, carries away one's wisdom, as the wind (carries away) a boat on water.'³ According to the *Gītā*, even the wise man who strives may still find his mind carried away against his will: 'For, Kaunteya, even of a wise man who strives, the churning senses carry away the mind forcibly.'⁴ Elsewhere, too, Kṛṣṇa describes the mind as 'fickle' (*cañcala*) and 'unsteady' (*āsthira*);⁵ and Arjuna also complains of the difficulty of the task set given the weakness of the mind: 'For the mind is fickle, O Kṛṣṇa, stirring, vehement (and) intense. Its restraint, I think, is very hard to do, like (the restraint) of the wind.'⁶

Therefore, if the mind is to perform its proper function of restraining the senses, it too must be brought under control. It might be expected that this would be the task of the next highest faculty, the *ahaṁkāra* (the 'I' faculty), but if anything the ego would seem to be more of a hindrance than a help.

The *Gītā* has surprisingly little to say about the *ahaṁkāra*, though what it does have to say would indicate that it must bear much of the burden of blame for the embodied soul's plight. The *ahaṁkāra*, as the term implies, believes itself to be the centre of the psychosomatic body. But it is, of course, only the false self and remains blissfully unaware of the true nature of the soul. As such, the *ahaṁkāra* naturally considers itself an agent or doer of action in the world of *Prakṛti*. This might be acceptable if it did not also delude the soul itself into the same (but false) belief. As the *Gītā* puts it: 'Actions in their

1) See Bh.G. 2.55-56, 60,67.

2) Bh.G. 3.6.

3) *Indriyāṇāṃ hi caratāṃ yaṁmano anuvidhiyate/
Tadasya haratī prajāñāṃ vāyurnāvamivāmbhasi//* Bh.G. 2.67.

4) *Yatato hyapi kaunteya puruṣasya vipaścitaḥ/
Indriyāṇi pramāthīni haranti prasabhaṃ manaḥ//* Bh.G. 2.60.

5) Bh.G. 6.26.

6) *Cañcalaṃ hi manaḥ kṛṣṇa pramāthi balavaddr̥ḍham/
Tasyāhaṃ nigrahaṃ manye vāyoriva suduṣkaram//* Bh.G. 6.34.

entirety are done by the *guṇas* of Nature; (but) the soul, deluded by the ego, thinks: "I am the doer."¹ Therefore, so long as the soul is bonded to material Nature, it is deluded by the ego into the belief that it too is an agent of action; for in this bonded state the soul actually seems to act, though it can never act. And, so long as the soul, deluded by the *ahaṃkāra*, believes that it acts and suffers, then so long is it enchained to one psychosomatic body after another. In reality, of course, the soul is quite independent of the body; the belief in its bondage is the greatest delusion of all.

So, if liberation is to be achieved, the *ahaṃkāra* must also be pulled into line. And this leads to the highest faculty in the psychosomatic body, the *buddhi*. Upon it hinges the salvation or the downfall of the self. The *buddhi* is the faculty of discrimination, or the mental faculty which makes decisions or judgements. If the *manas* collects and processes the information from the senses, it is the *buddhi* that makes decisions upon the basis of the processed information. In the *Gītā*, the nature (*ātmika*) of the *buddhi* is said to be *vyavasāya*,² which has the sense of 'strenuous effort or exertion, settled determination, resolve and purpose.' According to the *Gītā*, the *buddhi* is discriminating correctly when its effort and determination are directed towards the soul (and ultimately God) alone, and away from all that is to do with *Prakṛti*.³

The *buddhi*, then, is the most important faculty in man from the point of view of religious salvation. It alone, the *Gītā* states, has the capacity to apprehend the soul.⁴ As well, the *buddhi* alone is capable of stilling the *manas*, and ultimately the other lower faculties, and thus directing them towards Spirit and away from material Nature. The *Gītā* suggests the nature of this process through the rather common simile of a tortoise withdrawing its limbs: 'When he

1) *Prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ/*

Ahaṃkāravimūḍhātmā kartāhamiti manyate// Bh.G. 3.27.

2) Bh.G. 2.41.

3) Bh.G. 2.54-72.

4) Bh.G. 6.20-21.

entirely withdraws his senses from the objects of sense, as a tortoise (withdraws its limbs), his wisdom is firmly based." The idea seems to be that the functioning of the lower faculties is brought under control, and progressively absorbed into the higher faculties, until all are brought to rest, thus allowing the soul to be revealed. 'Gradually he should become quiescent through his intellect holding resolute. Having made the mind rest in the soul, he should think of nothing at all.'²

It is, therefore, the ignorance of the *buddhi* and its failure to discriminate correctly that allows the *ahaṃkāra* to arrogate to itself the false belief that it is the true centre of the psychosomatic organism, and to thereby delude the soul; and it is the ignorance of the *buddhi* that allows the lower faculties to be swept away by desire. Salvation, then, ultimately depends upon the *buddhi* throwing aside its ignorance and fulfilling its proper function.

While, according to the *Gītā*, it is possible to achieve this saving knowledge through one's own unaided introspection,³ the *Gītā* does offer the psycho/physical form of training known as *dhyāna* or meditation as a supporting technique. Again, this technique assumes and requires human effort and action.

The mental discipline of *dhyāna* lies largely outside of the Vedic tradition, and its promotion in the *Gītā* may be considered as part of the effort by the orthodox tradition to adapt to the changing religious times. Briefly put, meditation is a technique for the achievement of systematic control over the mental processes. The basic steps include perfection of breath control, through which the individual can control the senses. By bringing the senses to rest the individual can progressively restrict and control the activity of the mind until everything to do with Nature - or what is not Spirit - is stilled. With the

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- 1) *Yadā saṃharate cāyaṃ kūrmo aṅgānīva sarvaçaḥ/*
Indriyāṇīndriyārthebhyastasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā// Bh.G. 2.58.
 - 2) *Çanaīḥ çanairupamedbuddhyā dhṛtigṛhītayā/*
Ātmasaṃsthāṃ manaḥ kṛtvā na kiṃcidapi cintayet// Bh.G. 6.25.
 - 3) See Bh.G. 13.24.

psychosomatic body brought to a state of rest through this individual discipline, the timeless soul within should then stand forth. Such techniques of mental discipline are very old in the Indian tradition, and they were prominently used and developed by heterodox groups. However, in the brāhmaṇical tradition they do not make an appearance until the late classical *Upaniṣads* (the *Kaṭha*, *Ṣvetāśvatara* and *Maitrī Upaniṣads*), some of which may be almost contemporaneous with the *Gītā*.¹

In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa provides in some detail practical instructions on how to undertake meditation,² but the purpose and the technique involved is most summarily described as follows:

Shutting out external contacts, fixing the gaze between the eyebrows; making the inward and outward breaths even, as they move within the nostrils; with senses, mind and intellect restrained; intent on liberation, with anger, fear and desire gone, that sage is liberated forever.³

Here meditation is a psycho-physical form of training by which the mental processes may be brought under control, and all attachment to *Prakṛti* ended; an attachment which is reflected in such attitudes as 'anger, fear and desire'.

The *Gītā*'s consideration of *jñānayoga* inevitably raises the problem of action generally, in its relationship to religious salvation; and this leads the *Gītā* on to its second approach - *karmayoga* or the discipline of action. The problem is, of course, general to religions. How should a seeker after religious salvation behave in this world so as not to endanger his higher search? In the Indian tradition the problem is even more acute because of the belief in the law of karma, whereby any act gives rise to consequences that must come to fruition in this life or future births. But if all actions merely bound one to the wheel of existence, how was one ever to escape the cycle of rebirth and

1) See Hopkins, *The Hindu Tradition*, pp.64-7.

2) See Bh.G. 6.11-17, 8.10-13.

3) Sparṣāṅkṛtvā bahirbāhyāṅścaḥśuṣṭāivāntare bhruvoh/
Prāṇāpānau samau kṛtvā nāsābhyantaracāriṇau//
Yatendriyamanobuddhirmunirmokṣaparāyaṇaḥ/
Vigatecchābhayakrodho yaḥ sadā mukta eva saḥ// Bh.G. 5.27-28.

achieve *mokṣa*?

The obvious answer was that provided by the various heterodox groups: renounce all social and family duties, and lead the life of an ascetic or mendicant living in seclusion in the forest. This style of life offered far fewer karma producing opportunities, and action could be kept to a necessary minimum while the seeker got on with the hard discipline of religious salvation. However, this solution could only serve to undermine the orthodox brāhmanical tradition which was based on the maintenance of an ordered hierarchic society. Society, as we have seen, was conceived of as an organic whole in which every part must necessarily accept its allotted position and fulfill its allotted duties.

On matters of duty and ethics the *Gītā* is essentially conservative, and ultimately upholds the orthodox position. Kṛṣṇa indicates that it is He who generates the four-fold caste system;¹ and when the *dharma* is endangered, He incarnates himself on earth to restore it.² The *Gītā* is also particularly concerned to ensure that all men fulfill not just *dharma*, but their allotted *dharma*.³

As a defender of the traditional order, the problem of how to reconcile the heightened interest in the pursuit of religious salvation with the need to preserve social order and to uphold the *dharma* is one of the chief concerns of the *Gītā*.⁴ The *Gītā*'s answer is provided in its discussion of *karmayoga*, a solution which one author has appropriately described as renunciation in action, as opposed to renunciation of action.⁵ To begin with, the *Gītā* repudiates forthwith the heterodox solution. Though the individual might wish to renounce all actions, inaction was in any case quite impossible. The accumulated consequences of past lives would compel the individual to action.⁶ Thus

1) Bh.G. 4.13.

2) Bh.G. 4.7-8.

3) Bh.G. 3.35.

4) cf. Bh.G. 4.16.

5) Hiriyanna, *op.cit.*, p.121.

6) 'For no one can ever remain inactive even for a moment; for all, (even the) unwilling, are made to act by the constituents born of Nature.' Bh.G. 3.5.
Na hi kaṣcitkṣaṇamāpi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt/
Kāryate hyavaçaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijairguṇaiḥ//

Arjuna's belief that he could choose to abstain from action and become a mendicant was quite misconceived. And if nothing else, action was ultimately necessary if only to keep the body in functioning order.'

If work one must, then how was the individual to ever obtain *mokṣa* in the face of the law of karma? According to the *Gītā*, it was not action in itself that bound one to recurring birth, but the desire for the rewards of action.

In this analysis, it was desire and passion that led a man to action in the expectation of some 'fruit' or reward. Therefore it was desire, and not action, that was the real enemy of the seeker of religious salvation, and that was most fundamental to man's bondage. In striking terms Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna: 'It is desire, it is anger - arising from the strand of *rajas* - the great devourer, the great evil; know that this is the enemy on earth.'²

From this analysis the conclusion followed that if the individual acted indifferently without any interest in the result, the action would have no karmic consequences, and therefore liberation from *Prakṛti* would be attained. Renunciation of results, and not renunciation of action, was the *Gītā*'s answer to the problem presented by action, the law of karma, and *mokṣa*. As Kṛṣṇa explained to Arjuna: 'Your claim is to the action alone, never to the fruits. Let not your motive be the fruit of action, nor your attachment be to inaction. ... For the wise, who are integrated by the intellect, renounce the fruit born of action; and they are freed from the bondage of birth, and go to a place of bliss.'³

1) Bh.G. 3.8.

2) *Kāma eṣa krodha eṣa rajogūṇasamudbhavaḥ/*
Mahāṇano mahāpāpmā viddhyenamiha vairiṇam// Bh.G. 3.37. cf. 2.62-63, 3.34.

3) *Karmaṇyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana/*
Mā karmaphalaheturbhūrmā te saṅgo astvakarmaṇi// Bh.G. 2.47.
Karmajaṃ buddhiyuktā hi phalaṃ tyaktvā manīṣiṇaḥ/
Janmabandhavinirmuktāḥ padaṃ gacchantyanāmayam// Bh.G. 2.51.
 This analysis, of course, meant that the ordinary person need not renounce all his existing family and social bonds to lead the life of a mendicant, as the heterodox maintained. He could instead work towards salvation in whatever situation and environment he found himself in. As most believers could not do a Buddha and just throw off all family and social obligations,

In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa endlessly insists that a follower of *karmayoga*, truly detached from the results, must necessarily hold all things the same. Indifference, not inaction, sums up the position of the *Gītā* on action. This, of course, is Arjuna's problem for his dilemma is caused by his attachment to the results of the battle, the destruction of the family and its duties, and the resulting caste disorder. Kṛṣṇa, though, counsels Arjuna against this human deficiency: 'Hold happiness and suffering, gain and loss, victory and defeat to be the same, then prepare yourself for battle; thus will you incur no evil.'¹

The *Gītā* develops this analysis a step further by arguing that actions done as a sacrifice also do not bind.² However, the only true recipient of any sacrifice is God. Therefore, Arjuna is advised not just to renounce the 'fruit' of all actions, but: 'With mind upon the soul, entrust all (your) actions to Me. Be free of desire and indifferent, (then) fight, your fever gone.'³ The *Gītā*'s final conclusion for the *karmayogin* is that instead of doing actions for personal gain, or merely renouncing their results, one should do them as a sacrifice for God's benefit. As the 'fruit' is for God and not the doer, there is no karmic bondage, and hence liberation will be attained.

Though at first sight the *Gītā* may seem to be portraying *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* as separate ways for the attainment of *mokṣa*, this is not really the case. As we have seen, a true follower of the discipline of knowledge should be attached only to Spirit and be detached from all to do with Nature. If, as Kṛṣṇa says, he must perform actions in the world of *Prakṛti*, then these actions must necessarily be performed with an attitude of indifference. Equally, the *karmayogin*'s performance of non-attached action only makes sense within the intellectual framework provided by *jñānayoga*. *Karmayoga* is merely the mental

this was a most important response to the contemporary religious crisis.

1) Sukhaduḥkhe same kṛtvā lābhālābhau jayājayau/

Tato yuddhāya yujyasva naivaṃ pāpamavāpsyasi// Bh.G. 2.38.

2) Bh.G. 3.9.

3) Mayi sarvāṇi karmāṇi samnyasyādhyātmacetasā/

Nirāṣīrṇirmamo bhūtvā yudhyasva vigatajvaraḥ// Bh.G. 3.30.

attitude of *jñānayoga* translated into practice.¹

In fact, the *Gītā* uses the term *buddhiyoga* to refer to the combination of these two disciplines.² This term is appropriate recognition of the fact that the *buddhi* or the discriminating faculty is the key to salvation. It also reinforces the fact that both disciplines assume implicitly and explicitly the importance and efficacy of individual effort.

However, it is important to note that the individual exertion involved in *buddhiyoga* gains one not full religious salvation, but only a half way home. And, as we shall see, the *Gītā* is much more sceptical about the efficacy of human action in achieving the remainder of the journey.

The condition of the one who has successfully pursued the path of *buddhiyoga* is variously described in the *Gītā*. The *Gītā*'s descriptions of this condition include: 'supreme peace' (*parā śānti*),³ 'complete peace' (*śāntim ... naiṣṭhikīm*),⁴ 'perfection' (*siddhi*),⁵ the 'highest goal' (*paramām* and *parāṃgatim*),⁶ and 'happiness' (*sukha*) which is 'imperishable' (*akṣara*).⁷ More significantly, to describe this condition the author of the *Gītā* has also chosen to draw upon the terminology used by the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism to describe their conception of the highest goal - *brahman* and *nirvāṇa*. Thus, to refer to this condition the *Gītā* uses such compounds as : 'become *brahman*' (*brahmabhūta*),⁸ 'becoming *brahman*' (*brahmabhūya*),⁹ 'this state is *brahman*' (*eṣā brāhmī sthitiḥ*),¹⁰ 'in *brahman* they stand' (*brahmaṇi te sthitāḥ*),¹¹ and 'knowing *brahman*, in *brahman* he will stand' (*brahmavidbrahmaṇi sthitāḥ*).¹² However, those who achieve *mokṣa* may attain an even more complicated metaphysical state,

1) This, too, the *Gītā* would seem to openly recognise when it says: 'He who sees *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* as one, he (really) sees.' *Ekaṃ sāṃkhyam ca yogaṃ ca yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati*// Bh.G. 5.5. In the *Gītā*, *Sāṃkhya* is equivalent to *jñānayoga*, and *Yoga* to *karmayoga*.

2) e.g. Bh.G. 2.49-51.

4) Bh.G. 5.13.

6) Bh.G. 8.21, 9.32, 13.38, 16.22.

8) Bh.G. 5.24, 6.27, 18.54.

10) Bh.G. 2.72.

12) Bh.G. 5.20.

3) Bh.G. 4.39, 18.62.

5) Bh.G. 8.15, 14.1, 18.45-46.

7) Bh.G. 5.21.

9) Bh.G. 14.26, 18.53.

11) Bh.G. 5.19.

though the *Gītā* seems to mostly reserve this for when they die: 'he attains to the *nirvāṇa* that is *brahman*' (*brahmanirvāṇamṛcchatī*);¹ 'he approaches the *nirvāṇa* that is *brahman*' (*brahmanirvāṇam ... adhigacchatī*);² 'they obtain the *nirvāṇa* that is *brahman*' (*labhante brahmanirvāṇam*);³ 'around (him) is the state of *brahmanirvāṇam* (*abhito brahmanirvāṇam*);⁴ and 'he approaches the peace which has *nirvāṇa* as its end' (*çāntiṃ nirvāṇaparamāṃ ... adhigacchatī*).⁵ However, what precisely the author of the *Gītā* means by the terms *brahman* and *nirvāṇa* in these contexts is by no means clear, and has been the subject of much controversy amongst translators and commentators.

The difficulty with the use of the word *brahman* is that in most of the *Upaniṣads* it is the name used for the Absolute; and as the predominant view in the *Upaniṣads* is that the soul or *ātman* is *brahman*, these descriptions have often been taken to support a monistic interpretation of the *Gītā* in which the 'liberated' soul is absorbed into *brahman*, losing all individuality. Indeed, by this interpretation, as the Absolute or *brahman* is One without a second, then the very idea of a separate individual soul is an illusion when compared to that unfractionable One. It also follows that absorption into the Impersonal Absolute is the highest goal in the *Gītā*, and not realisation of one's relationship with the Personal God.

However, at the time of the *Gītā*, and certainly at the time of the *Upaniṣads*, the meaning of the term *brahman* was by no means settled;⁶ and, in any case, the *Gītā* is in the habit of providing its own particular meaning to commonly used terms. It would seem the best guide to the *Gītā*'s understanding of these terms should be what the *Gītā* itself has to say about them. To do otherwise is to risk reading in preconceived ideas.

The *Gītā*'s own wording would suggest that these terms simply refer to the

1) Bh.G. 2.72.

2) Bh.G. 5.24.

3) Bh.G. 5.25.

4) Bh.G. 5.26.

5) Bh.G. 6.15.

6) See J. Gonda, Notes on Brahman, pp.1-60.

individual's 'discovery' or realisation of his own spiritual core; that is, the timeless, immutable, and limitless state of existence which is his own soul.'

Thus at 2.71-72, the *Gītā* tells us:

Forsaking all desires, the man who wanders about without longing, indifferent, and free from ego, approaches peace. This, O Pārtha, is the state of *brahman*; attaining it, one is not deluded. Abiding in this (state), even at death, one attains to the *nirvāṇa* that is *brahman*.²

Here the first verse outlines the state of indifference, both mental and physical, that is required for *mokṣa*. The second verse says that this detached state is *brahman*. There is no suggestion anywhere that it is the state of pure consciousness that is the monistic Absolute.

Similarly 5.19 defines *brahman* in terms of the characteristics of the liberated *yogin*: 'In this very world, those whose minds are settled in indifference, conquer (the process) of emanation. For *brahman* is faultless and indifferent; therefore in *brahman* they abide.'³ In this verse, it is said that when the mind or *manas* is 'standing in indifference' (*sāmye sthitam*), then such people are 'standing in *brahman*'. *Brahman*, it follows, is a name for the state which is 'indifferent' and 'without fault'; and this is the state of the liberated one who has realised the distinction between Nature and Spirit. This state of perfect indifference is here attained while yet in the world. Again, there is no suggestion at all that *brahman* refers to the state of pure consciousness of the monistic Absolute.⁴

1) This would seem to be the view of at least R.C. Zaehner and R.N. Minor. Zaehner, who stresses Buddhist influence throughout the *Gītā*, points out that the compound *brahmabhūta* is a stock epithet in the Pali Canon of the man who has achieved liberation, and entered *nirvāṇa*. As such, the phrase *brahmabhūta* means to enter 'a form of existence which is unconditioned by space, time, and causation, the very "flavour" of *nirvāṇa*.' Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā ... op.cit.*, p.214. Also Minor, *op.cit.*, pp.96-8.

2) *Vihāya kāmānyaḥ sarvānpumāṅścarati niḥspṛhaḥ/
Nirmamo nīrahaṁkāraḥ sa cāntimadhigacchati//
Eṣā brāhmī sthitiḥ pārtha naināṁ prāpya vimuhyati/
Sthitvāsyāmantakāle api brahmanīrvāṇamrcchati// Bh.G. 2.71-72.*

3) *Ihaiva tairjitaḥ sargo yeṣāṁ sāmye sthitam manaḥ/
Nirdoṣaṁ hi samaṁ brahma tasmādbrahmaṇi te sthitāḥ// Bh.G. 5.19.*

4) cf. Bh.G. 6.27, 18.54.

Therefore, when *brahman* is used of the liberated *yogin*, it merely refers to the state of consciousness attained when all to do with non-Spirit has been abandoned. Such a *yogin* has realised the true nature of his soul as timeless, immortal and immutable. The *brahman* of the *Gītā* is not the Absolute of the *Upaniṣads* or the Absolute of *Advaita Vedānta*.

That this is so is further suggested by the fact that the term *brahman* is used in a variety of other senses in the *Gītā*. It is commonly used to refer to *Prakṛti*, or Kṛṣṇa's lower Nature.¹ *Brahman* is also certainly used to refer to the *Vedas* in the expression *ṣabdabrahman*, 'the word *brahman*';² just as it is an epithet for Kṛṣṇa in the expression *param brahman*.³

If the author of the *Gītā* has converted the Upaniṣadic *brahman* to his own ends, the same may be expected of the term *nirvāṇa*. By origin *nirvāṇa* is a Buddhist term, and is not adopted into the Hindu tradition until after its acceptance by the *Gītā*.⁴ The term is used by Buddhists to refer to the state of liberation attained in this life, with the term *parinirvāṇa* being normally reserved for the state of the enlightened one after death. Literally the term means 'blowing out' and refers to the extinction of the desire and suffering which are the characteristics of worldly existence and the cause of rebirth. This is, if you like, the negative side of the term. To what extent there is a positive content to the term has been a subject of endless controversy given the Buddha's denial of the idea of an eternal soul and reluctance to speculate on metaphysical issues. However, this is a problem for the Buddhists, for it is the *Gītā*'s use of the term that is of concern here. In the *Gītā*, *nirvāṇa* is normally used in the compound *brahmanirvāṇa*, 'the *nirvāṇa* that is *brahman*',⁵ and this compound is used to indicate the state the liberated *yogin* attains, more especially at death as opposed to in this life. As the compound equates

1) Bh.G. 3.15, 4.24-5, 5.10, 14.3-4.

2) Bh.G. 6.44.

3) Bh.G. 10.12, 13.12.

4) Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā ... op.cit.*, p.159.

5) See Bh.G. 2.72 and 5.24-26. Only at 6.15 is the term used by itself.

the two terms, and as *brahman* refers to the state of consciousness of the liberated *yogin* and not to any Upaniṣadic Absolute, then it seems reasonable to conclude that *nirvāṇa* must do the same.¹

One could be forgiven for wishing that the author of the *Gītā* had used these terms with greater precision, or possibly not used them at all, given their currency at the time. But the use of the terms was no doubt quite intentional. The real purpose of the author of the *Gītā* seems to have been to take two of the most commonly used contemporary terms to indicate the highest religious goal, and then to subordinate them to the supremacy of his personal God. For the *Gītā* makes it quite clear that Kṛṣṇa, and not *brahman* or *nirvāṇa*, is the highest goal. Thus the *yogin* is said to 'approach the peace which has *nirvāṇa* as its highest and which stands in Me.'² In this verse the peace of *nirvāṇa* is the reward of the *yogin* who has realised the eternal nature of his true soul; but this is not the final goal, for *nirvāṇa* is said to stand or be established in the personal God. The same is the case with the term *brahman*, for Kṛṣṇa quite indisputably says: 'I am the foundation of *brahman*.'³

So far, then, we have seen that through human effort and exertion the state of *brahmanirvāṇa* (however it is interpreted) may be attained, though this only takes the *yogin* part of the way towards the *Gītā*'s final goal - the realisation of one's relationship with the supreme personal God. The *Gītā*, it should be noted, itself lays emphasis on the importance of individual human effort in the attainment of salvation. It does this notably in a verse which plays on the dual meaning of *ātman* as the reflexive pronoun or phenomenal individual, and as the soul or transcendental self: 'One should uplift the Self by oneself; one should

1) Note, too, van Buitenen's suggestion on the use of *nirvāṇa* at 2.72: 'surely a reply to the Buddha's declaring that even while taking a brahmanistic stance in a life of social activity, a person can attain the serenity which the Buddhists have arrogated to themselves while not socially active.' van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā ... op.cit.*, p.163.

2) Çāntiṃ nirvāṇaparamāṃ matsaṃsthāmadhigacchatī// Bh.G. 6.15.

3) brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhāham Bh.G. 14.27.

not let the Self sink down. For oneself alone is the friend of the Self; (and) oneself alone is the enemy of the Self.'¹ Kṛṣṇa also emphasises the need for individual exertion when answering Arjuna's doubts about the difficulty of *yoga*:

Undoubtedly, O strong-armed (prince), the mind is hard to subdue and fickle; but Kaunteya, it can be restrained by repeated discipline and indifference (to worldly desires). In my opinion this *yoga* is hard to attain by one whose self is not controlled; but it can be attained, by the proper means, by one whose self is controlled (and) who exerts himself.²

Nevertheless, while accepting the importance of human action, the *Gītā*, it must be emphasised, does not consider the human agent as totally free and unrestrained in the doing of human action. The *Gītā* recognises that the ability of individuals to seek and achieve ends, including *mokṣa*, varies considerably; and these variations it principally explains in terms of the theory of the *guṇas* and the law of karma.

According to the *Gītā*'s metaphysics, *Prakṛti* proceeds through ever-recurring cycles from a state of primal unity to manifold diversity to primal unity again. The difficulty for the *Gītā*'s author is how to account for the tremendous diversity that comes forth. We have seen how the *Gītā*'s author, drawing upon contemporary dualist theories, accepted the outlines of a scheme whereby out of the primal 'matter' there came forth twenty-four principles of Nature, which with the various secondary transformations, produced all the manifold forms of existence, animate and inanimate.

However, this explanation only accounts for half the diversity. While it neatly accounts for the origin of the various forms or parts of fully evolved *Prakṛti* (e.g. humans and trees) it does not explain the differences within each of these parts. To account for these, the *Gītā* adopts a seemingly simple and imaginative solution: the theory of the *guṇas*.

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- 1) Uddharedātmanātmānaṃ nātmānamavasādayet/
Ātmaiva hyātmano bandhurātmaiva ripurātmanah// Bh.G. 6.5.
 - 2) Aśaṃçayaṃ mahābāho mano durnigrahaṃ calam/
Abhyāseṇa tu kaunteya vairāgyeṇa ca grhyate//
Aśaṃyatātmanā yogo duṣprāpa iti me matiḥ/
Vaçyātmanā tu yatatā çakyo avāptumupāyataḥ// Bh.G. 6.35-36.

The word *guṇa*, by origin, means a strand or thread, more particularly of a rope or chord. By this analogy, just as a rope consists of the interweaving of the component strands and nothing else, then so does material Nature consist of the interweaving of the various *guṇas*, and nothing else.' There are three *guṇas* only. The first *guṇa*, called *sattva*,² is normally translated as 'goodness', though more correctly it refers to 'purity' and 'brightness'. In particular, it is the strand that helps the embodied soul to find release from bondage to Nature. The second *guṇa*, called *rajas*,³ is usually translated as 'passion, activity or energy', though by origin it denotes 'dust or dusty coloured'. This *guṇa*, in particular, promotes action and is characterised by passion, purpose and energy. The third *guṇa*, called *tamas*,⁴ literally means 'darkness' and implies 'dullness, inertia or sloth'. It is the very opposite of the purity and brightness of *sattva*, and of the energy and activity of *rajas*.

The principal characteristics of the three *guṇas* are well described in Kṛṣṇa's classification of the various sorts of bondage according to the *guṇas*:

Sattva, *rajas*, *tamas* - these are the strands arising from Nature. They, O strong-armed (prince), bind the imperishable embodied (soul) to the body. Amongst these, *sattva*, because of its purity, is illuminating (but yet) it binds (the soul) through attachment to joy and knowledge, O sinless one. Know that *rajas* has the nature of passion and arises from attachment to desire; it binds the embodied (soul) through attachment to action, O Kaunteya. But know that *tamas* is born from ignorance (and) deludes all embodied (souls); O Bhārata, it binds through carelessness, indolence, and sleepiness. *Sattva* causes attachment to joy, *rajas* to action, O Bhārata. But *tamas*, covers over knowledge, (and) causes attachment to carelessness.⁵

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- 1) In the *Gītā* the *guṇas* are variously described as being 'born of Nature', *prakṛtiḥ* (3.5, 18.40), or 'produced from Nature', *prakṛtisambhavāḥ* (14.5), or more simply they are said to be 'of Nature', *prakṛteḥ* (3.27, 3.29). Though the exact significance (if any) of saying that the *guṇas* are born of or produced from *Prakṛti* is not entirely clear, it would still seem that, combined together, they are material Nature.
 - 2) From *sat* 'being', the present participle of as 'to be'.
 - 3) From *raj* 'to glow, to be excited'.
 - 4) From *tam* 'to perish, grow sad.'
 - 5) *Sattvaṃ rajastama iti guṇāḥ prakṛtisambhavāḥ/
Nibadhnanti mahābāho dehe dehinamavyayam//
Tatra sattvaṃ nirmalatvātpakāṣakamanāmayam/
Sukhasaṅgena badhnāti jñānasaṅgena cānagha//
Rajo rāgātmakam viddhi tṛṣṇāsaṅgasamudbhavam/*

These three strands pervade all the physical (animate and inanimate) and mental phenomena in the triple-world. Nothing, Kṛṣṇa states, escapes the hold of the three *guṇas* - even the very gods are subject to them.¹ It is through the preponderance of one or other of the *guṇas* that the particular character or nature of any part of material Nature is determined.² Though it has only three elements in its explanatory apparatus, the *guṇa* theory has the capacity to explain all variations within the parts of Nature.

The *Gītā* classifies a wide selection of physical and mental phenomena in terms of the three *guṇas*; but ultimately the bulk of the phenomena chosen can be seen to relate to what is one of the *Gītā*'s principal concerns - human action and the achievement of religious salvation. It is the *guṇas* that explain or account for the variations in the ability of human action and effort to achieve liberation.

Thus in the final chapter, Kṛṣṇa classifies in terms of the *guṇa* theory the elements of knowledge, action, the agent of action, the intellect, and the resolve of the agent of action. These are all crucial ingredients in the disciplines of knowledge and action - both of which presuppose the importance and efficacy of human action - and we must now consider them.

(a) Knowledge:

Know that that knowledge is of the nature of *sattva* which sees a single imperishable being amongst all creatures, the undivided amongst the

Tannibadhnāti kaunteya karmasaṅgena dehinam//
 Tamastvajñānaṁ viddhi mohanaṁ sarvadehinām/
 Pramādālasyanidrābhīstannibadhnāti bhārata//
 Sattvaṁ sukhe sañjayati rajaḥ karmaṇi bhārata/
 Jñānamāvṛtya tu tamaḥ pramāde sañjayatyuta// Bh.G. 14.5-9.

1) Bh.G. 18.40.

2) In the *Gītā*, it should be noted, material Nature includes not just physical forms, but also the mental faculties of living beings, particularly of man. When used to account for the nature of physical phenomena, the *guṇas* seem to have a concrete application with the sense of being a physical constituent part of Nature, in the same way that a strand is in a rope. However, when used to account for mental phenomena, the *guṇas* seem to have a more abstract application with the sense of being a particular quality. By comparison, the developed *Sāṃkhya* philosophy insists that the *guṇas* are physical constituent parts of matter and not qualities. See F. Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā: or Song of the Blessed One, p.39.

divided. But that knowledge which perceives amongst all creatures manifold and different forms because of their separateness, know that that knowledge is of the nature of *rajas*. But (that knowledge) which is irrationally attached to a single object as if it were all, trifling and not conforming to truth, that (knowledge) is called *tamas*.¹

Sattvic knowledge, then, is that which sees in all creatures - divided and ever-changing though they are - the unchanging and undivided (or single) soul.

Sattvic knowledge sees the soul as the exact opposite of Nature. However, rajasic knowledge sees beings only in terms of their divisions and differences, and not in terms of the underlying eternal soul. Rajasic knowledge only sees, and is only attached to Nature. Tamasic knowledge sees only the particular object or purpose to which it is attached, believing that this is all there is. It knows not the soul. Tamasic knowledge is concerned with what is trifling, or unimportant and insignificant, and not with what conforms to truth or reality.

(b) Action:

That action is called of the nature of *sattva* when it is done without passion or hate, free from attachment, (and as) established (by scriptures), by one who does not seek reward. But action is called of the nature of *rajas* when, entailing much effort, it is done by one who seeks reward or by one who is egoistic. That action is called *tamas* which is undertaken from delusion without paying regard to consequence, (including) destruction or injury, (and one's own) prowess (for it).²

Therefore sattvic action is doing what is required by religious duty, as defined in the sacred texts, without attachment to the action itself or the results. By contrast, rajasic action is again distinguished by attachment to results and desire, and with the false belief that the soul does the action. Tamasic action is the product of delusion, and is seemingly done without any care or regard

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- 1) Sarvabhūteṣu yenaikaṃ bhāvamavyayamīkṣate/
Avibhaktaṃ vibhakteṣu tajjñānaṃ viddhi sāttvikam//
Prthaktvena tu yajjñānaṃ nānābhāvānprthagvidhān/
Vetti sarveṣu bhūteṣu tajjñānaṃ viddhi rājasam//
Yattu kṛtsnavadekasmiṅkārye saktamahetukam/
Atattvārthavadalpaṃ ca tattāmasamudāhṛtam// Bh.G. 18.20-22.
 - 2) Niyataṃ saṅgarahitamarāgaadvēṣataḥ kṛtam/
Aphalāprepsunā karma yattatsāttvikamucyate//
Yattu kāmepsunā karma sāhaṃkareṇa vā punaḥ/
Kriyate bahulāyāsaṃ tadrājasamudāhṛtam//
Anubandhaṃ kṣayaṃ hiṁsāmanapekṣya ca pauruṣam/
Mohādārābhyate karma yattattāmasamucyate// Bh.G. 18.23-25.

for social norms.

(c) Agent of action:

An agent is said to be of the nature of *sattva* when he is unchanged in success and failure, filled with resolution and perseverance, speaks not of 'I', and is freed from attachment. An agent is declared to be of the nature of *rajas* when he is filled with joy and grief, impure, hurtful by nature, greedy, desirous of the fruit of his actions, and passionate. An agent is called of the nature of *tamas* when he is despondent and procrastinating, indolent, deceitful, fraudulent, arrogant, vulgar, and unprepared.¹

Again, the *sattvic* agent is free from attachment to results, and from the idea that the soul acts. Also, the *sattvic* agent is indifferent, the same in success and failure. The *rajasic* agent is an agent of desire and is attached to the results of actions. Desire and attachment lead to such attributes as greed and impurity, and so on. The *tamasic* agent has a most unattractive set of attitudes - despondency, laziness, cheating, vulgarity etc.

(d) Intellect:

That intellect is of the nature of *sattva* which knows bondage and liberation, fear and fearlessness, what is to be done and what not, activity and inactivity. That intellect, O Pārtha, is of the nature of *rajas* which incorrectly understands what is to be done and what not, and law and lawlessness. That intellect, O Pārtha, is of the nature of *tamas* when, covered over by darkness, it takes law to be lawlessness, and all things the wrong way round.²

The *sattvic* intellect, then, discriminates correctly with respect to activity, *dharma* and *mokṣa*, while the *rajasic* intellect has an incorrect understanding regarding these issues. But the intellect under the predominance of *tamas* has *dharma* and *adharma*, right and wrong, totally reversed. This is not just

- 1) Muktasāṅgo anahamvādī dhṛtyutsāhasamanvitah/
Siddhyasiddhyornirvikārah kartā sāttvika ucyate//
Rāgī karmaphalaprepsurlubdho hiṁsātmako aṣuciḥ/
Harṣaṣokānvitah kartā rājasah parikīrtitah//
Ayuktaḥ prākṛtaḥ stabdhaḥ ṣaṭho naikṛtiko alasaḥ/
Viśādi dīrghasūtrī ca kartā tāmasa ucyate// Bh.G. 18.26-28.
- 2) Pravṛttiḥ ca nivṛttiḥ ca kāryākārye bhayābhaye/
Bandhaḥ mokṣaḥ ca yā vetti buddhiḥ sā pārtha sāttvikī//
Yayā dharmamadharmaḥ ca kāryaḥ cākāryameva ca/
Ayathāvatprajānāti buddhiḥ sā pārtha rājasī//
Adharmaḥ dharmamiti yā manyate tamasāvṛtā/
Sarvārthānviparītāṅṣa buddhiḥ sā pārtha tāmāsī// Bh.G. 18.30-32.

confusion about *dharma*, but the complete substitution of *adharma* for *dharma*.

(e) Constancy of the agent:

O Pārtha, that constancy is of the nature of *sattva* by which one supports the work of the mind, breaths, and senses by means of unswerving yoga. Arjuna Pārtha, that constancy is of the nature of *rajas* by which one observes law, pleasure and profit out of attachment. O Pārtha, that constancy is of the nature of *tamas* by which a fool will not give up sleep, fear, grief, despondency, and exhilliaration.¹

The constancy of *sattva*, then, is a firmness in the practice of yoga, in the control of the psychosomatic body, and in non-attached action. The constancy of *rajas* is a firmness in which one holds fast to what are normally considered well-regarded goals of action - *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. Again, this constancy is distinguished by desire for reward. The objects of tamasic constancy are most unfortunate: sleep, fear, grief, and so on.

However, Kṛṣṇa's classification of these elements presupposes that the *guṇas* are in a fixed state, where one is preponderant, and the others subordinate. This, though, is not the normal condition of the *guṇas*, for they are *Prakṛti* viewed from another angle, and as such they are in constant movement. Any particular configuration of the *guṇas*, it would seem, is inherently unstable, with each *guṇa* trying to get on top of the other two. The *Gītā* suggests the struggle as follows:

Having overcome *rajas* and *tamas*, *sattva* predominates, O Bhārata. (And) in that same way *rajas* (overcomes) *sattva* and *tamas*, and *tamas* (overcomes) *sattva* and *rajas*. When at all the doors of the body the light of knowledge arises, then you should know that *sattva* has increased. When *rajas* has increased, O best of the Bhāratas, there arises greed, exertion, the undertaking of actions, restlessness, and covetousness. When *tamas* has increased, joy of the Kurus, there arises darkness, inertia, carelessness, and delusion.²

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- 1) Dhṛtyā yayā dhārayate manahprāṇendriyakriyāḥ/
Yogenāvyabhicārīṇyā dhṛtiḥ sā pārtha sāttvikī//
Yayā tu dharmakāmārthāndhṛtyā dhārayate arjuna/
Prasaṅgena phalākāṅkṣī dhṛtiḥ sā pārtha rājasī//
Yayā svapnaṃ bhayaṃ ṣokaṃ viṣādaṃ madameva ca/
Na vimuñcati durmedhā dhṛtiḥ sā pārtha tāmasī// Bh.G. 18.33-35.
 - 2) Rajastamaḥcābhibhūya sattvaṃ bhavati bhārata/
Rajaḥ sattvaṃ tamaḥcaiva tamaḥ sattvaṃ rajastathā//
Sarvadvāreṣu dehe asminprakāṣa upajāyate/
Jñānaṃ yadā tadā vidyādvivṛddhaṃ sattvamityuta//

The *guṇas*, it is apparent, lead to certain sorts of behaviour patterns. *Rajas*, for instance, leads to exertion, restlessness and covetousness etc., while *tamas* fosters inertia, carelessness and delusion, and so on. But, in turn, these forms of behaviour further strengthen and reinforce the predominance of the particular *guṇa*. Thus we have been told above that *rajas* arises from attachment to desire, while *tamas* is born from ignorance.'

Therefore, at any particular moment an individual can be said to feature his own distinctive *guṇa* configuration that reflects that individual's past actions, and in turn influences that individual's future actions. This mechanism also explains the working of the law of karma in the *Gītā*. For it is the state of the individual's *guṇa* configuration at death - and this reflects one's lifetime of works - that determines the new birth. As Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna:

If the embodied (soul) dies when *sattva* has increased, then he obtains the pure world of those who have the highest knowledge. He who dies when *rajas* (has increased) will be born amongst those attached to action. Likewise, he who dies when *tamas* (has increased) will be born in the wombs of the deluded. ... Those who abide in *sattva* go upward; those whose nature is *rajas* stand in the middle; those whose nature is *tamas*, standing in the mode of the lowest *guṇa*, they go downward.²

Therefore, the consequences of one's past actions carry over to the new life in accordance with the law of karma.

Elsewhere, too, Kṛṣṇa expresses himself in terms that would indicate the *Gītā*'s acceptance of the law of karma in its true form. For instance, when Arjuna asks as to the fate of one who believes in *buddhiyoga*, but who (try as he might) fails to win liberation in this life, Kṛṣṇa reassuringly indicates that

 Lobhaḥ pravṛttirārambhaḥ karmaṇāmaçamaḥ sprhā/
 Rajasyetāni jāyante vivṛddhe bharataṣabha//
 Aprakāṣo apravṛttiṣca pramādo moha eva ca/
 Tamasyetāni jāyante vivṛddhe kurunandana// Bh.G. 14.10-13.

1) Bh.G. 14.7-8.

2) Yadā sattve pravṛddhe tu pralayaṃ yāti dehabhṛt/

Tadottamavidāṃ lokānamalānpratipadyate// (14)

Rajasi pralayaṃ gatvā karmasaṅgiṣu jāyate/

Tathā pralīnastamasī mūḍhayoniṣu jāyate// (15)

Ūrdhvaṃ gacchanti sattvasthā madhye tiṣṭhanti rājasāḥ/

Jaghanyaguṇavṛttasthā adho gacchanti tāmasāḥ// (18) Bh.G. 14.14-18.

his meritorious striving will receive its appropriate reward in succeeding lives.

The one who has failed in *yoga* attains the worlds of the virtuous, and having dwelt there for endless years, he is born again in a house of the pure and prosperous. Or else, he will be born in a family of wise *yogins*; but a birth of such a kind is harder to obtain in this world. There, he obtains union with the *buddhi* belonging to his former body, and thereupon he once more strives for perfection, O joy of the Kurus. He is carried along by his former discipline, even despite his will. ... Purified of sin, (this) zealously striving *yogin* (is) perfected after many births: he journeys the highest way.¹

Therefore, any striving or effort after Kṛṣṇa's recommended way does not go to waste for, in accordance with the law of karma, the consequences of actions in this life come to fruition in future lives. In this instance, the striver after Kṛṣṇa's way will at least gain a better start in the next rebirth, and will begin the new birth with a *buddhi* or discriminating faculty at the same level as that attained in the current birth. Then, concludes Kṛṣṇa, in this new birth one is pushed along the path of religious salvation 'involuntarily', as a consequence of one's efforts in former lives.²

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- 1) Prāpya puṇyakṛtāṅllokānuṣṭvā ṣāṣṭvātīḥ samāḥ/
 Ṣcīnām ṣrīmatām gehe yogabhraṣṭo abhijāyate//
 Atha vā yogināmeva kule bhavati dhīmatām/
 Etaddhi durlabhataram loke janma yadīdṛṣam//
 Tatra taṁ buddhisamyogaṁ labhate paurvadehikam/
 Yatate ca tato bhūyaḥ saṁsiddhau kurunandana//
 Pūrvābhyāseṇa tenaiva hriyate hyavaṣo api saḥ/
 Jīṁāsuraṇi yogasya ṣabdabrahmātivartate//
 Prayatnādyatamānastu yogī saṁcuddhakilbiṣaḥ/
 Aneka janmasaṁsiddhastato yāti parām gatim// Bh.G. 6.41-45.
 Also compare Kṛṣṇa's discussion of the lot of those born to a divine or devilish destiny. While the *Gītā* talks of it as a 'destiny' or 'fate' (*sāmpada*) to which one is 'born' (*abhijātasya*), the *Gītā* implicitly and explicitly assumes that this lot is due to the individual's accumulated actions and choices; though it would seem that the higher one rises or the lower one sinks on the scale of religious salvation, then the more one is likely to choose actions that will push one either further up or further down. This is especially the case with the man of a demonic destiny who, because of his ignorance, is completely controlled by his *ahaṁkāra*, and obsessed with the satisfaction of his own lusts and desires, sets himself up as the lord of the universe in place of Kṛṣṇa. Such a one falls into 'foul hell' (*narakeṣu*). Bh.G. 16.6-21.
- 2) Presumably the idea is that because of the seeker's actions in former lives, the preponderance of *sattva* in his make-up has become progressively stronger. Therefore, in his new life, the make-up of the *svabhāva* makes him even more strongly inclined towards religious salvation; in fact, so strongly inclined that he is now carried along 'involuntarily'. This does not mean that he becomes a controlled puppet, for it must be realised that he now desires

It would seem, then, that at any particular moment the nature of the individual's essential being - what the *Gītā* calls the *svabhāva* or 'own being' - is established by that individual's accumulated history of action. In effect, the nature of the individual's *svabhāva* constitutes his karmic balance. In turn, this *guṇa* configuration or *svabhāva* influences the nature and direction of new actions. And so the interplay between action and *guṇas* proceeds throughout life. At death, the *svabhāva* of the departing individual is carried across and becomes the *svabhāva* of the new life. The actions and choices of this new life will be determined against the background of the inherited *svabhāva*. To this extent, the actions of an individual are predetermined by the 'fruit' or consequences of actions in past lives.

This situation is well illustrated by Arjuna's own predicament. Arjuna is born a *kṣatriya*, and is therefore born with a *rajas* dominated *svabhāva* appropriate for a *kṣatriya*. Kṛṣṇa describes the actions that arise from the *svabhāva* of a *kṣatriya* in the following terms: 'Valour, energy, resolution, skill, not fleeing in battle, generosity, an imperious temperament; (these) are the actions, born from his nature, of a *kṣatriya*.' Given this, Kṛṣṇa reasonably tells Arjuna that he must fight, for his *rajas* dominated *svabhāva* gives him no other true choice:

If, clinging to your ego, you think, "I will not fight", vain is your determination (for) Nature will impell you. O Kaunteya, you are fettered by your own work, which arises from your (own) nature. (Therefore) what from folly you do not wish to do, that you will do despite your desire.²

Therefore, given his *svabhāva*, Arjuna's freedom to decide on whether he will fight, will be tightly constrained; in fact, so tightly constrained that in this

this end, and the strength of this desire is due to his previous actions.

- 1) *Çauryam tejo dhṛtirdākṣyam yuddhe cāpyapalāyanam/
Dānamīçvarabhāvaçca kṣatrakarma svabhāvajam// Bh.G. 18.43.*
For the 'natural-born' actions of all the *vārṇas*, see Bh.G. 18.42-44.
- 2) *Yadahaṃkāramāçritya na yotsya iti manyase/
Mithyaiṣa vyavasāyaste prakṛtistvām niyokṣyati//
Svabhāvajena kaunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā/
Kartuṃ necchasi yanmohātkariṣyasyavaçopi tat// Bh.G. 18.59-60.*

case Kṛṣṇa says he has no choice at all.

This does not, of course, mean that all Arjuna's, or anyone else's actions, are predetermined by the *guṇa* structure or *svabhāva* inherited at birth. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa's insistence that the individual must do the caste duties that correspond to one's inherited *guṇa* structure would be both pointless and senseless if this was the case. What it does mean is that the individual's personality type is inborn at birth; and quite reasonably, this personality type effects the way one acts. Therefore, as an agent of action, the psychosomatic individual is neither completely free nor completely bound; the ability to act as a free agent is constrained, but not eliminated, by one's inherited *guṇa* structure and the law of karma.

So far, an examination of the *Gītā*'s views on *buddhiyoga*, and on the theory of the *guṇas* and the law of karma, would indicate the *Gītā*'s acceptance of some degree of free agency pertaining to the phenomenal individual. That this is so should not be a matter of surprise, for as we have seen the *Gītā*'s solution to the contemporary religious crisis consists of its own unique blending of the speculative side of the orthodox philosophical tradition, with elements of the ideas and practices of the heterodox tradition, along with the theistic and devotional elements of more popular faith. Now, by and large, the *Upaniṣads* and the major schools of Indian philosophy, and certainly the major heterodox faiths of Buddhism and Jainism, stress the need for human effort in the attainment of religious salvation, and presuppose some degree of human freedom.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that these assumptions have been carried into the *Gītā*.

However, though the author of the *Gītā* admits a place for human endeavour, this is all he does. Compared to say the Pali Canon of Buddhism, little apparent emphasis is placed on it.² This is seemingly because the *Gītā*'s favoured

1) See Jayatilleke, *op.cit.*, pp.135-43; and F. Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā: or Song of the Blessed One*, pp.17-29. 2) Jayatilleke, *op.cit.*, pp.135-43.

method of religious salvation is through loving devotion to a personal God. The origins of this approach, and indeed the origins of Kṛṣṇa himself, lie largely in the popular religious tradition, about the development of which we know all too little.¹ However, by its very nature we can reasonably conjecture that the popular fascination with devotion and personal anthropomorphic gods is much more preoccupied with God's grace than man's effort. So too, ultimately, is the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Though the *Gītā* commends and approves the intellectual approach of *buddhiyoga*, in many places it emphasises the difficulties of this discipline based on self-effort. To achieve *mokṣa*, the individual must give up desire,² despite its sweeping force;³ he must give up the fruit of all works, good and evil;⁴ he must give up his own false notion of self, the product of the *ahaṁkāra*; and he must be totally detached, the same in success and failure.⁵ There was nothing easy in this, as the Buddha would have recognised.

If turning away from *Prakṛti* was hard enough, attaining realisation of one's spiritual core was no easier, the difficulty being the indeterminate nature of the soul. Thus the soul is said to be 'unmanifest' (*avyakta*) and 'immutable' (*avikārya*); but even more it is 'unthinkable' (*acintya*).⁶ According to another verse: 'By a rare chance someone may behold this one; and by a rare chance another may speak of this one; and by a rare chance another may hear about this one; (but) even having heard no one knows this one.'⁷ Presumably the problem is that ultimately the task of realising the soul, which is unconditioned by time, space and change, falls to the *buddhi* which is conditioned by time, space and change. The difficulty of the task is apparent.

1) See Edgerton, *op.cit.*, pp.30-33

3) Bh.G. 2.62.

5) Bh.G. 2.48.

7) Ācāryavatpaçyati kaçcidenam

Ācāryavadvadati tathaiva cānyaḥ/

Ācāryavaccainamanyah ṣṇoti

ṣrutvāpyenam veda na caiva kaçcit// Bh.G. 2.29.

2) Bh.G. 2.55.

4) Bh.G. 2.51.

6) Bh.G. 2.25.

As well, despite the formidable difficulties, knowledge of one's spiritual core and attainment of the state of *brahmanirvāṇa* carry one only part way towards true religious salvation in the *Gītā*. As we have seen, beyond this timeless and eternal but impersonal state, there remains to be found the personal God, Kṛṣṇa. The *Gītā* is adamant that of all seekers of religious salvation, the highest is the *yogin* who, having attained *mokṣa* and *brahmanirvāṇa*, moves on to find Kṛṣṇa:

The *yogin* is considered higher than the ascetic; higher even than the man of knowledge, and higher than the man of action; therefore, Arjuna, be a *yogin*. But of all *yogins*, he who has faith and reveres-and-worships Me, with his inner soul gone to Me, I consider him the most disciplined.'

Thus it is the *yogins*, with their 'inner soul' (*antarātman*) 'gone to' Kṛṣṇa (*madgatenā*) who are the highest.

However, if obtaining knowledge of the state of *brahmanirvāṇa* through one's own effort is difficult, obtaining knowledge of this personal God by oneself is even more difficult and exacting. According to Kṛṣṇa: 'Among thousands of men, perhaps one will strive, (and) even of those striving for perfection, perhaps one will know Me truly.'²

Nevertheless, at the same time, the *Gītā* indicates that God may be readily attained by the *yogin*: 'O Pārtha, I am easily attained by that ever-disciplined *yogin* who bears Me in mind continuously without ever thinking of another.'³ There is no inconsistency here, for what man, unaided, finds so hard, God can easily do through the instrument of his saving grace:

To those who, ever-disciplined, revere (Me) lovingly, I give that discipline of the intellect by which they come to Me. Through compassion for them I, abiding in my own nature, dispel their darkness born of

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- 1) Tapasvibhyo adhiko yogī jñānibhyo api mato adhikah/
Karmibhyaṣcādhiko yogī tasmādyogī bhavārjuna//
Yogināmapi sarveṣāṃ madgatenāntarātmanā/
Ḡraddhāvānbhajate yo mām sa me yuktatamo mataḥ// Bh.G. 6.46-47.
 - 2) Manuṣyāṇāṃ sahasreṣu kaṣcidyatati siddhaye/
Yatatāmapi siddhānām kaṣcinmām vetti tattvataḥ// Bh.G. 7.3.
 - 3) Ananyacetāḥ satataṃ yo mām smarati nityaṣaḥ/
Tasyāhaṃ sulabhāḥ pārtha nityayuktasya yoginaḥ// Bh.G. 8.14.

ignorance with the shining lamp of wisdom.¹

Therefore, those who have chosen to revere God, are, in turn, rewarded by Kṛṣṇa with the saving knowledge of Himself that is so hard to attain by their own efforts. Man still has a part to play, for he must freely choose to revere Kṛṣṇa;² nevertheless, the emphasis has undeniably shifted from man's effort to God's effort. Therefore, it is through love and devotion and God's grace that the *yogin* attains the ultimate goal of Kṛṣṇa himself; and not through knowledge acquired by individual effort. As Kṛṣṇa says: 'O Pārtha, that Supreme Person is to be attained by exclusive devotion.'³

However, it should be noted, it is not entirely clear here whether the *Gītā* is talking of Kṛṣṇa's devotees in general, or only of those devotees who have already attained *mokṣa*. The difficulty is whether the *yukta* in *satatayuktānām*, 'of those always disciplined', refers just to those who are disciplined, i.e. who have attained *mokṣa*, or also to those who are practising discipline, i.e. working towards liberation. In the *Gītā*, the context of the past participle *yukta* would more normally suggest the former meaning; but this is not necessarily the case. In this instance, if only liberated *yogins* are meant, it seems curious to refer to their 'darkness born of ignorance'. This seems a more appropriate description of the *yogin* who has yet to attain *mokṣa*. If the latter is what is meant, then the 'knowledge' that Kṛṣṇa gives his devotees must include both the realisation of the soul as distinct from *Prakṛti*, and the knowledge of God that allows the devotee to draw near to Him.

The uncertainty here may be clarified in the final chapter where Kṛṣṇa

1) Teṣāṃ satatayuktānāṃ bhajatāṃ prītipūrvakam/
 Dadāmi buddhiyogaṃ taṃ yena māmupayānti te//
 Teṣāmevānukampārthamahamajñānaṃ tamah/
 Nāçayāmyātmabhāvastho jñānadīpena bhāsvatā// Bh.G. 10.10-11.

2) The primary meaning of the root *bhaj* is 'to divide, distribute, allot, or apportion to', and from this an important secondary meaning is 'to serve, honour, revere, love, adore'. However, the root also has an important secondary meaning of 'to declare for, prefer, choose'.

3) Puruṣaḥ sa paraḥ pārtha bhaktyā labhyastvananyayā/ Bh.G. 8.22.

quite unambiguously indicates that the attainment of *brahman* is a lesser stage preparatory to entering into God Himself; and that where *brahman* may be attained through discipline and effort, the final goal may only be attained by devotion and God's grace:

Joined to a pure intellect and restraining (him)self resolutely; abandoning the objects of sense - sound etc. - casting off love and hatred; dwelling in isolation, eating lightly, restraining speech, body and mind; devoting himself constantly to the supreme discipline of meditation, and casting off egotism, force, pride, desire, anger and acquisitiveness; indifferent (and) at peace - he is fit for becoming *brahman*. Having become *brahman*, with soul brightened, he grieves not, and he desires not. The same to all beings, he attains the highest devotion to Me. Through devotion, he comes to know Me, and how great I really am. Thereupon, knowing Me truly, he enters Me forthwith. Though ever performing all actions, he takes refuge with Me, (and) through my grace he will attain to an everlasting imperishable abode.'

At this point, it would seem, the *Gītā* pictures religious salvation as a two stage process, which combines the individual effort of *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* in the first stage, with God's saving grace and *bhaktiyoga* in the second. Therefore, formally at least, these three approaches are not separate methods of religious salvation, but merely parts of the one overall way. Given that one purpose of the *Gītā* is to mediate amongst the conflicting religious trends of the time, a compromise position of this sort might well be expected.

The problem is that the *Gītā* does not always seem to believe in its own compromise, and betrays its preference for devotion and God's grace alone as the only true approach for religious salvation. In the process, the idea of individual action and effort is much downgraded in importance.

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- 1) Buddhya viçuddhayā yukto dhṛtyātmānaṃ niyamyā ca/
 Çabdādīnviṣayānśtyaktvā rāga dveṣau vyudasya ca//
 Viviktasevī laghvācī yatavākkāyamānaṣaḥ/
 Dhyānayogaparo nityaṃ vairāgyaṃ samupāçritaḥ
 Ahaṃkāraṃ balaṃ darpaṃ kāmaṃ krodhaṃ parigrahaṃ/
 Vimucya nirmamaḥ çānto brahmabhūyāya kalpate//
 Brahmabhūtaḥ prasannātmā na çocati na kāṅkṣati/
 Samaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu madbhaktiṃ labhate parāṃ//
 Bhaktyā māmabhijānāti yāvānyaçcāsmi tattvataḥ/
 Tato mām tattvato jñātvā viçate tadanantaram//
 Sarvakarmānyapi sadā kurvāṇo madvyapāçrayaḥ/
 Matprasādādavāpnoti çāçvataṃ padamavyayam// Bh.G. 18.51-56.

The true preferences of the *Gītā* are revealed when, after the tremendous vision of chapter 11, Arjuna responds with a seemingly innocuous question: of those who are 'constantly yoked' (*satatayuktā*), which is the 'best knower of yoga', those who are devoted to Kṛṣṇa or those who are devoted to the 'imperishable unmanifest' (*akṣaram avyaktam*)?¹ Arjuna's question would seem to be the result of a confusion. In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa has talked about the attainment of *brahmanirvāṇam*, and about devotion to God. Arjuna, seemingly oblivious to the fact that these may be two stages in the one way, now contrasts them, and asks which is the better.² But interestingly, Kṛṣṇa does not sort out Arjuna's confusion, but accepts the contrast, and answers (not surprisingly) that the highest *yogin* is the one who is disciplined, faithful, and completely attached to Kṛṣṇa.³

As well, Kṛṣṇa explains that those who revere the Imperishable Unmanifest may also reach Him, but significantly he adds that they pursue much the harder way:

But those who honour the unspecifiable Imperishable Unmanifest, omnipresent, unthinkable, immutable, immovable and fixed; who restrain the multitude of senses, their intellect impartial always; (and) who are devoted to the welfare of all beings - they, too, attain to Me. (But) greater is the affliction of those whose minds are intent on the Unmanifest; for the unmanifested way is attained by embodied men with difficulty.⁴

Kṛṣṇa does not spell out in what way devotees of the Imperishable Unmanifest may attain to Him, but in the light of what has been said above,⁵ we may

1) Bh.G. 12.1.

2) Arjuna's question also seems to implicitly assume that the 'constantly yoked' are those who are determinedly practising yoga, but who are not yet liberated.

3) Bh.G. 12.2.

4) Ye tvakṣaramanirdeṣyamavyaktaṁ paryupāsate/
Saratragamacintyaṁ ca kūṭasthamacalaṁ dhruvam//
Saṁniyamendriyagrāmaṁ sarvatra samabuddhayaḥ/
Te prāpnuvanti māmeva sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ//
Kleṣo adhikatarasteṣāmayaktāsaktacetasām/
Avyaktā hi gatirduḥkhaṁ dehavadhiravāpyate// Bh.G. 12.3-5.

It is quite apparent in this passage that Kṛṣṇa is the highest goal, and not the Vedantin Absolute.

5) See Bh.G. 8.22, 10.10-11, 18.51-54.

expect that it is through God's saving grace; for, as we have seen, God loves the *yogin* who has won release from the bondage of *Prakṛti*.

The way of devotion, Kṛṣṇa now reveals, is easier because it will invite Kṛṣṇa's intervention as a saving force that will lift up His devotees struggling towards *mokṣa*:

But those who, devoted to Me, entrust all actions to Me (and) who continue contemplating Me with exclusive (*bhakti*-)yoga; of these (ones), whose minds are directed to Me, I soon become the deliverer from the ocean of death and rebirth, O Pārtha.'

Thus, in these verses the way of liberation through *buddhiyoga* and 'becoming *brahman*' is portrayed as almost prohibitively difficult. By contrast, those who offer up all their actions to Kṛṣṇa, and practise devotion to Kṛṣṇa and no other, will invoke the help of Kṛṣṇa, the divine saviour (*samuddhartā* 'one who lifts up') who will 'soon' (*na cirāt*) raise them up from the rounds of rebirth and redeath. Admittedly, the devotee must do his part too by choosing to be devoted to Kṛṣṇa, and consequently, being indifferent to all that is *Prakṛti*. But having made the initial move, Kṛṣṇa will intervene and lift the devotee up to full salvation.

Bhaktiyoga, it would seem, is here raised to the status of an independent way to salvation which, once the necessary steps are taken by the devotee, is relatively easy, immediate, and guaranteed in its result. Kṛṣṇa's original scheme of *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* leading to *brahmanirvāṇa*, and then *bhaktiyoga* leading to the God beyond, surely becomes academic. This is not to say that *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* are completely irrelevant, for the devotee could not make the initial move towards Kṛṣṇa without knowledge of these; but ultimately it is *bhaktiyoga* that leads the devotee to rapid salvation. Detachment and

1) Ye tu sarvāṇi karmāṇi mayi saṁnyasya matparāḥ/
 Ananyenaiva yogena mām dhyāyanta upāsate//
 Teṣāmahaṁ samuddhartā mṛtyusaṁsārasāgarāt/
 Bhavāmi nacirātpārtha mayyāveçitacetasām// Bh.G. 12.6-7.

indifference are still important, but love of God is what really matters.' Therefore it should not be thought that this new emphasis on *bhaktiyoga* provides an instant short-cut to *mokṣa* for those of weak temperament and deficient ability. The devotee is still required to make the effort to practise the old virtues of detachment and indifference, but he is not required to be completely successful. God will ensure success. Individual effort is still required, but less importance is attached to it, and correspondingly more is given to God's effort.

It should also be noted that this emphasis on salvation through devotion was an essential element in the *Gītā*'s, and orthodox Hinduism's, adaptation to the heterodox challenge. For it represented an approach that was substantially easier than the more exacting requirements of say early Buddhism, let alone the rigours of Jainism. And just as the heterodox faiths were open to all, so was the *Gītā*'s *bhakti*. In the *Gītā*, it does not matter how low in standing the devotee might be; all that matters is his attitude: 'O Pārtha, even those who are low born - women, *vaiçyas*, *çūdras* - even they go the highest way if they take refuge with Me.'² Making salvation open to all was a most significant departure from the exclusive nature of the brāhmaṇical tradition.

Bhaktiyoga, then, provided a method of religious salvation that was psychologically satisfying and which could be readily practised by all, high and humble. It was one of the essential adaptations in the eventual emergence of a revitalised and stronger Hinduism. An unavoidable cost, though, was a much

1) This is apparent in Kṛṣṇa's enumeration of the categories of people who are particularly dear to Him. These categories are characterised by the virtues of self-control, indifference, and dispassion that Kṛṣṇa has discoursed on at such length; and therefore Kṛṣṇa says of each group that the devotee is 'dear to Me' (*sa me priyaḥ*). But, concludes Kṛṣṇa, those who revere His teachings, who have faith in Him, and who are intent on Him, these devotees are 'beyond measure dear to Me' (*te atīva me priyāḥ*). See Bh.G. 12.13-20.

2) Mām hi pārtha vyapāçritya ye api syuḥ pāpayonayaḥ/
Striyo vaiçyāstathā çūdrāste api yānti parām gatim// Bh.G. 9.32.

reduced emphasis on the importance of human effort and action in personal salvation.

To summarise, so far we have seen that the *Gītā*, though with very varying emphasis, does accept that human actions are meaningful, and that within the constraints of the theory of the *guṇas* and the law of karma, the individual does have a degree of freedom. Nevertheless, a major difficulty remains to the argument that the *Gītā* does admit some degree of free-will: many parts of the *Gītā* are quite undeniably deterministic in meaning and intent. These parts seem to relate in one way or another to the question of the direct relationship of the supernatural form of God to the state of *Prakṛti*, and the state of *Puruṣa*. Is this relationship such that the apparent freedom accorded the phenomenal individual on the one hand is snatched away on the other through the all-powerful hand of God that alone moves and controls all?

As the *Gītā* concerns Arjuna's moral dilemma, the problem may be related back to this setting. At the end of the *Gītā*, Arjuna does accept Kṛṣṇa's teachings, and he stands up to fight God's enemies. But is this Arjuna's free decision following on God's advice, or is it because Kṛṣṇa has controlled and changed Arjuna from within?

The author of the *Gītā*, it may be said, spares no effort to build up his conception of the personal God; and to this end quite unblinkingly draws upon notions of the divine from the popular tradition and the orthodox brāhmaṇic tradition. The result might be considered one of the *Gītā*'s less successful syntheses. As S.N. Dasgupta has put it:

... it is evident that the *Gītā* does not know that pantheism and deism and theism cannot well be jumbled up into one as a consistent philosophic creed. And it does not attempt to answer any objections that may be made against the combination of such opposite views. The *Gītā* not only asserts that all is God, but it also again and again repeats that God transcends all and is simultaneously transcendent and immanent in the world. The answer apparently implied in the *Gītā* to all objections to the apparently different views of the nature of God is that transcendentalism, immanentism and pantheism lose their distinctive and opposite characters in the melting whole of the super-personality of

God. Sometimes in the same passage, and sometimes in passages of the same context, the *Gītā* talks in a pantheistic, a transcendental or a theistic vein, and this seems to imply that there is no contradiction in the different aspects of God as preserver and controller of the world, as the substance of the world, life and soul, and as the transcendent substratum underlying them all. In order to emphasise the fact that all that exists and all that is worthy of existence or all that has a superlative existence in good or bad are God's manifestation, the *Gītā* is never tired of repeating that whatever is highest, best or even worst in things is God or God's manifestation.¹

In other words, the *Gītā*'s view of the nature of God is something of an all-inclusive jumble.

However, the predominant tone in the *Gītā* is not the pantheism or deism of the intellectual tradition but the theism of the popular tradition.. Theism may reasonably be considered to be 'the doctrine that the ultimate ground of things is a single supreme reality (i.e. God) which is the source of everything other than itself and has the characters of being (a) intrinsically complete or perfect and (b), as a consequence, an adequate object of unqualified adoration or worship.'² In brief, this coincides with St. Anselm's view that God is 'the being than which none greater can be thought.'³

Now, the author of the *Gītā* has made every effort to present God as the object which accords with St. Anselm's view of God. As we have seen, the impersonal Absolute of philosophical Hinduism, and the *nirvāṇa* of Buddhism are subordinated to Kṛṣṇa, and in the *Gītā* virtually every known personal name of the divine is considered as an appellation of Kṛṣṇa.⁴ However, Kṛṣṇa is not in the strict sense the source of everything other than Himself; for as we have seen, Nature and Spirit are in Kṛṣṇa and have been eternally so. There is nothing other than God, for ultimately all is God in a pantheistic sense.

Logically it might be thought that this should seriously compromise the theistic position in as much as it may confuse the distinction between God and

1) S.N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, vol.2, p.527.

2) E.A. Taylor, 'Theism' in Hastings (ed.), op.cit., vol.11, p.261.

3) Ibid.

4) See Bh.G. 10.12-15; 11.37-40; 9.17-18.

man, and between God and the universe; and it is just this distinction which is vital to any truly theistic philosophy.¹ The theistic view that God is to be worshipped presupposes a belief in the real existence of beings who can worship God, and belief in God as a separate and distinct Personality. Clearly, pure theism is easier if God is interpreted as the creator of existence who then stands apart from His creation which is deemed to be separately real. This view does not fit comfortably with any pantheistic notions that equate God and all that exists. Theism makes more sense if God is transcendent or apart from the universe.

Now, in various parts of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa is portrayed as transcending the triple-world. Thus Arjuna says of Kṛṣṇa: 'You are the First God, the Primeval Person, the highest receptacle of all this (universe), the knower, what is to be known, and the highest abode; by you, all (this universe) was spread out, O you of endless forms.'² And Kṛṣṇa says of Himself: 'As I have passed beyond the Perishable, and am higher even than the Imperishable, therefore, in the world and in the *Veda*, I am renowned as the Supreme Person.'³

However, it is Kṛṣṇa's immanence in, or indwelling of the world that is most evident in the *Gītā*. Admittedly, it is not at all unusual in theistic systems for the transcendent God, who was before the world and apart from it, as its creator and ruler, to be in some sense at least present or immanent in it.⁴ Nor is it unusual, or indeed surprising, that this immanence should tend in a pantheistic direction.⁵ However, what is unusual in the *Gītā* is the

1) Taylor, *op.cit.*, p.262.

2) Tvamādidēvaḥ puruṣaḥ purāṇas
tvamasya viçvasya paraṁ nidhānam/
Vettāsi vedyam ca paraṁ ca dhāma
tvayā tataṁ viçvamanantarūpa// Bh.G. 11.38.

3) Yasmātkṣaramatīto ahamakṣarādapi cottamaḥ/
Ato asmi loke vede ca prathitaḥ puruṣottamaḥ// Bh.G. 15.18.

4) A.C. McGiffert, 'Immanence' in Hastings, *op.cit.*, vol.7, p.167.

5) *Ibid.*, p.171.

thoroughgoing, and even extreme, view that is presented of Kṛṣṇa's immanence. This, it would seem, can be attributed to the pre-existing strength of the pantheistic and monistic trends in the Indian philosophical tradition. To this pantheistic trend, the *Gītā*'s author is much indebted. However, a doctrine of immanence-cum-pantheism imperils, and may even destroy, the idea of the separate personality of God, and the notion of man as a separate and responsible agent.¹

Now, the author of the *Gītā* does at least rescue God from the peril of becoming an impersonal Absolute by strongly developing the divine personality. As Arjuna finds out, the personal form of God can be as terrifying as it is loving:

Seeing (your form) touching the sky, ablaze, multi-coloured with mouths opened and eyes wide and blazing, my inner-self trembles, and I cannot find either firmness or peace. Seeing your mouths with their dreadful fangs, which resemble the (devouring) fire of Time, I know not my directions, and can obtain no refuge. Have mercy, O Lord of the gods, O Abode of the Universe.²

However, the author of the *Gītā* does not save man from his similar peril; which is hardly surprising given that the belief in, and the attachment to, the phenomenal individual is a sign of embarrassing ignorance, and is ultimately the cause of all suffering. The result of the *Gītā*'s failure to defend man from its building up of God is only too apparent. For in considerable parts of the text the immanence of God and his activity in the world seem so complete that all change is portrayed as due to the hand of God; while phenomenal man, to the extent that he is not swallowed up in the divine, is merely a powerless victim moved by a force quite beyond his control.

1) Ibid.

2) Nabhaḥspr̥ṣaṃ dīptamanekavarṇaṃ
 vyāttānaṃ dīptaviçālanetram/
 Dr̥ṣṭvā hi tvāṃ pravyathitāntarātmā
 dhṛtiṃ na vindāmi çamaṃ ca viṣṇo//
 Daṇṣṭrākarālāni ca te mukhāni
 dr̥ṣṭvaiva kālānalasaṃnibhāni/
 Diço na jāne na labhe ca çarma
 prasīda deveça jagannivāsa// Bh.G. 11.24-25.

At first sight, it might seem anomolous to talk of God's immanence in the *Gītā* given that Nature and Spirit are both considered to constitute the body of God. Can God, then, be immanent in a universe that is also ultimately a mode of God? In the *Gītā* the answer is a definite yes. For while all is divine and unified in God, nonetheless Spirit, Nature and the Supernatural Personality of God are all treated as separate and distinct parts of the one whole. It is the Supernatural Personality of God in this arrangement that becomes immanent and active in the ever-changing world of Nature and bonded souls.

The *Gītā* variously suggests that this is the case, but most explicitly in the following verse:

In this world there are two Persons, the Perishable (i.e. Nature) and the Imperishable (i.e. Spirit). The Perishable is all beings; the Imperishable is called that which stands at the highest. But the Highest Person is (yet) another, called the Supreme Soul; the Unchanging Lord who enters into and sustains the three worlds.¹

In these verses the Supernatural Personality of God is set off against Nature and Spirit as a third and higher principle,² which then enters and supports the universe, i.e. becomes immanent in it.

In the *Gītā*, God's immanence in the triple-world is portrayed in two essential ways, though no apparent attempt is made to harmonise them. Firstly, Kṛṣṇa is portrayed in terms of his activity on behalf of the universe. Through this activity he both supervises the processes of *Prakṛti* and directly controls these processes. Kṛṣṇa not only causes *Prakṛti* to emanate from and dissolve into its state of primal rest, but he also directs the *guṇas* and Time. Thus all the mechanisms that lie behind *Prakṛti*'s ceaseless change are in one way or another attributed to the control of the immanent God. For man, the effect is to retain his individuality but to reduce him to a controlled and powerless puppet.

1) Dvavimau puruṣau loke kṣaraṇcākṣara eva ca/
 Kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni kūṭastho akṣara ucyate//
 Uttamaḥ puruṣastvanyaḥ paramātmetyudāhṛtaḥ/
 Yo lokatrayamāviṣya bibhartavyaya īcvaraḥ// Bh.G. 15.16-17.
 2) cf. Bh.G. 13.1-2.

Secondly, Kṛṣṇa is conceived of as underlying or underpinning phenomenal existence as the very essence of everything. For man, the effect is to compromise the very idea of the phenomenal individual as a separate and distinct entity. All is swallowed up in God.

Though Kṛṣṇa, in his purely transcendent aspect is, like the individual soul, entirely beyond action, this is certainly not the case with his immanent aspect. In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa is revealed as a God who tirelessly works for and towards the ordered evolution of the universe. In fact, Kṛṣṇa portrays Himself to Arjuna as the great doer of non-attached action, the divine example for all men to follow.

O Pārtha, there is nothing that I need to do in these three worlds. (There is) nothing to be attained (that is) not attained (already) and (yet) I am engaged in action. For if I were not at all to engage in action untiringly, men everywhere would follow my path, O Pārtha. These worlds would fall into ruin if I did not do action. I would be a maker of confusion (and) I would ruin these (my) creatures.¹

Thus Kṛṣṇa explains that there is nothing He needs to do, for whatever He does can add nothing to His perfection; yet work He does. The location of this divine activity is the triple-world, and its purpose is the maintenance of the orderly course of the universe. If Kṛṣṇa were to stop his action, and the world were to follow, then destruction would ensue. However, though God's activity does have this purpose, it produces no *phala*, or personal 'fruit' for Kṛṣṇa's own benefit, and hence it is non-binding.²

In the *Gītā*, God is revealed as working on behalf of the universe in a number of ways. One of these concerns the *avatāra* doctrine, whereby God periodically becomes incarnate on earth to teach anew these His doctrines, and

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- 1) Na me pārthāsti kartavyam triṣu lokeṣu kiṃcana/
 Nānavāptamavāptavyam varta eva ca karmāṇi//
 Yadi hyaḥam na varteyaṃ jātu karmaṇyatandritaḥ/
 Mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaṇaḥ//
 Utsīdeyurime lokā na kuryāṃ karma cedaham/
 Saṃkarasya ca kartā syāmupahanyāmināḥ prajāḥ// Bh.G. 3.22-24.
- 2) Cf Bh.G. 4.14: 'Actions do not stain Me; I have no longing for the fruit of action.'
 Na mām karmāṇi limpanti na me karmaphale sprhā/

for the restoration of righteousness in the universe. Thus Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna:

Although I am unborn, my essence is unchanging, and I am the Lord of all creatures, (yet) I resort to Nature, which is mine, (and) I am born through my own power. For whenever there is a fading of *dharma*, O Bhārata, (and) a rising up of lawlessness, then I create Myself (on Earth). For the protection of the good, the destruction of the wicked, and the re-establishment of *dharma*, I am born in age after age.¹

However, Kṛṣṇa's activity on behalf of the universe is much more fundamental than that of a sort of cosmic repairman of the dharmic order. After all, it is Kṛṣṇa who brings about the evolution of *Prakṛti* from its state of primal rest;² and thereafter Kṛṣṇa is portrayed as continuing to exercise a supervisory function: 'With Me as supervisor, Nature produces the moving and the stationary; O Kaunteya, the world revolves by this means.'³ The word *adhyakṣa* means basically one who observes, but it has the secondary sense of one who exercises supervision. Kṛṣṇa, it would seem, does not just stand back and allow *Prakṛti* to change in accordance with the *guṇas*, karma and the onrush of Time; for He plays the part of a cosmic overseer of *Prakṛti*.

But elsewhere in the *Gītā*, the nature of Kṛṣṇa's control is seen in far more fundamental terms for He is portrayed as directing the processes of *Prakṛti* through the *guṇas* and Time.

The *guṇas* are a part of the divine form for they constitute *Prakṛti*, which is Kṛṣṇa's lower Nature. However, in terms of the *Gītā*'s metaphysics this does not compromise the idea of human freedom so long as the *guṇas* act as a sort of barometer of human action which explains the workings of the law of karma. The idea of human freedom would only be compromised if it could be shown that the

1) Ajo api sannavyayātmā bhūtānāmīṣvaro api san/
Prakṛtiṃ svāmadhiṣṭhāya sambhavāmyātmamāyayā//
Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata/
Abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānaṃ sṛjāmyaham//
Paritrāṇāya sādḥūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām/
Dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge// Bh.G. 4.6-8.

2) See Bh.G. 9.8-9.

3) Mayādhyakṣeṇa prakṛtiḥ sūyate sacarācaram/
Hetunānena kaunteya jagadviparivartate// Bh.G. 9.10.

guṇas were in any way under the control or direction of the Supernatural Personality of God.

Now, at one point in the *Gītā* the wording is such as to suggest that this is the case. Indeed, the *guṇas* are portrayed as one of the main instruments through which Kṛṣṇa exercises his personal power and control in the universe. The consequences of this for the law of karma are nowhere considered.

Also know that states of being, whether dominated by *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*, are from Me alone; but I am not in them, they are in Me. By these states of being which consist of the three *guṇas*, all this world is deluded; it knows Me not as the Supreme Imperishable. For this is my mysterious power, divine, consisting of the *guṇas*, and hard to overcome. Those who seek refuge in Me alone will cross over this mysterious power (of mine).¹

Though the *guṇas*, as a part of Kṛṣṇa, must ultimately originate from Kṛṣṇa, these verses seem to be saying more than just this. The implication is that each individual *guṇa* configuration that occurs in Nature is directly derived from the immanent Kṛṣṇa, and not from the effect of past individual actions. This would include, be it noted, *guṇa* combinations dominated by *rajas* (which produce desire), and *tamas* (which produce ignorance). If all this is so, the immanent Kṛṣṇa directs the workings of the *guṇas*. It might be suggested that Kṛṣṇa merely directs and enforces the *guṇas* in accordance with past actions, but the text gives no hint of this. And as these verses follow on a section in which Kṛṣṇa is described as immanent in the universe as the very essence of everything,² then this view seems even more doubtful.

Kṛṣṇa further indicates that the *guṇas* are the cause of confusion and delusion, and therefore presumably of the resulting good and evil in the world. It would seem that though God is here immanent in the world, it does not follow

1) Ye caiva sāttvikā bhāvā rājasāstāmasāṣṭa ye/
 Matta eveti tānviddhi na tvahaṃ teṣu te mayi//
 Tribhīrguṇamayairbhāvairebhiḥ sarvavidam jagat/
 Mohitam nābhijānāti māmehyaḥ paramavyayam//
 Daivī hyeṣā guṇamayī mama māyā duratyayā/
 Māmeva ye prapadyante māyāmetam taranti te// Bh.G. 7.12-14.
 2) See Bh.G. 7.8-11.

that communion with Him is made any easier; for God's real form is hidden by the operation of the *guṇas*. Only those who 'seek refuge' (*prapadyante*, 'throwing oneself down at the feet of') with Kṛṣṇa are able to penetrate beyond *Prakṛti* to God.

Then, in the final verse, Kṛṣṇa says that 'this' (*etad*) is his *māyā*, which is 'divine' (*daivī*), 'hard to overcome' (*duratyayā*), and 'consisting of the *guṇas*' (*guṇamayī*). This equation is significant, even if its meaning is not beyond dispute. Though most translators take '*etad*' as referring to the whole universe or *Prakṛti*,¹ the context would seem to refer it more specifically to the actual operation of the *guṇas* and the delusion they cause. This, it would seem, is Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*. What the *Gītā* actually intends by the word *māyā* is clearly important, but this elusive word has been variously rendered as 'illusion' and 'wizardry',² 'veil' and 'magic power',³ 'creative' and 'uncanny power',⁴ and 'mysterious power'.⁵

Etymologically the word is from the root *mā* which has the basic meaning 'to measure'. In the earlier language, the derivative *māyā* has the essential meaning of 'extraordinary' or 'supernatural power', and only later acquires such additional connotations as 'illusion, unreality, deception, fraud, trick, sorcery, witchcraft, magic'.⁶ It is this earlier sense of 'extraordinary or supernatural power' that seems to best correspond to the *Gītā*'s use of the word. Thus at 4.6 we are told that it is by Kṛṣṇa's *māyā* (*ātmamāyayā*) that He resorts to (*adhiṣṭhāya*) Nature, which is His own (*prakṛtiṃ svām*), and comes to be (*saṁbhavāmi*), i.e. as an *avatāra*. In this instance, it would seem that *māyā* is the power or instrument through which Kṛṣṇa achieves the divine intention, while *Prakṛti* is the location of the action. The *Gītā* also uses the word *māyā* in the

1) e.g. van Buitenen, *op.cit.*, p.99; Zaehner, *op.cit.*, p.183.

2) Van Buitenen, *op.cit.*, pp.99, 143.

3) K. Bolle, *The Bhagavadgītā: A New Translation*, pp.87, 211.

4) Zaehner, *op.cit.*, pp.250, 399. 5) Minor, *op.cit.*, p.245.

6) M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p.811.

final chapter where Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that though he may choose not to fight, nonetheless he will fight:

If, clinging to your ego, you think 'I will not fight', to no purpose is your resolve (for) Nature will constrain you. Kaunteya, you are bound to your own actions which arise from your own nature; (so) what, from delusion, you do not wish to do, that you will do, despite your desire. Arjuna, in the region of the heart of all beings abides the Lord; through his mysterious power, he whirls round all beings, who are mounted on a machine.¹

Arjuna is thus told in the first two verses that even though he does not will it, he will be bound to perform those actions that accord with his *svabhāva* or his *guṇa* configuration. However, the third verse explains this compulsion not in terms of the law of karma, but in terms of the Lord's *māyā*. Kṛṣṇa, it says, turns 'all beings' around like puppets mounted upon a *yantra* or 'machine'.² Therefore, according to this verse, Kṛṣṇa is immanent in all creatures as the Lord within the heart,³ and through the instrument of his 'mysterious power' or *māyā*, He directs the actions of the individual. Translated to the universal level, this means that Kṛṣṇa directs the movements of the *guṇas*, and thus of *Prakṛti*.⁴ Therefore, here too *māyā* is the means and *Prakṛti* the location of the effect.

Besides the *guṇas*, Kṛṣṇa is also immanent and active in the world as Time.

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- 1) Yadahaṁkāramācṛitya na yotsya iti manyase/
Mithyaiṣa vyavasāyaste prakṛtistvām niyokṣyati//
Svabhāvajena kaunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā/
Kartuṁ necchasi yanmohātkariṣyasyavaḥ api tat//
Īṣvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ hṛdḍeḥ arjuna tiṣṭhati/
Bhrāmayansarvabhūtāni yantrārūḍhāni māyayā// Bh.G. 18.59-61.
 - 2) A *yantra* - from the root *yam* 'to hold' - is a 'support' or 'instrument' or 'mechanical apparatus'.
 - 3) Though Kṛṣṇa can be said to indwell human beings as their soul, and though the soul has been variously described as the lord of the body (*prabhu* at 5.14, *vibhu* at 5.15, and *maheṣvaraḥ* at 13.22), it is not the soul that is meant here when it is said that Kṛṣṇa dwells in the heart of all beings. The soul, we have already seen, is immutable and eternally still or actionless. Therefore, though Kṛṣṇa does indwell human beings in the form of their *ātman*, He is also immanent in them as the lord within the heart and through the instrument of his *māyā* he directs the actions of the individual.
 - 4) Note Kṛṣṇa's casual comment: 'It is I who pour out heat, hold back the rain, and send it forth; ... Tapāmyahamaṁ varṣaṁ nigrhṇāmyutsṛjāmi ca/ Bh.G. 9.19 Kṛṣṇa's direction here extends right down to the minutiae.

The principal characteristic of Nature is unceasing change and nowhere is this more apparent than in the never-ending passing of Time as it brings new things into existence and takes old things out of existence. As we have seen, the remorseless nature of the passing of Time is such that it can readily pass over into a feeling of inevitability: the feeling that what Time brings to pass could not have been otherwise. In this view, the destiny of man is controlled by the external force of Time, not by his own actions. All this is indicated in the principal word for Time, *kāla*, which can just as readily mean Death and fate. In parts of the *Gītā*, Time does have this deterministic sense, but Time is not looked upon as an impersonal mechanism functioning according to its own dynamic, but as a result of the activity of the immanent Lord.

This is vividly confirmed when Kṛṣṇa reveals to Arjuna his awesome supernatural form in which Arjuna sees the universe in all its multiplicity converged in the oneness of Kṛṣṇa's body. However, what truly terrifies Arjuna is the sight of all the worlds rushing to their destruction in Kṛṣṇa's blazing mouths:

As moths, with (ever) increasing speed, enter a blazing fire to (their) destruction, so do these worlds, with (ever) increasing speed, enter your mouths to (their) destruction. You repeatedly lick (your lips) devouring these entire worlds all around (you) with your burning mouths. You fill the entire universe with your brilliant splendour; O Viṣṇu, your dreadful rays burn.¹

However, the change and destruction that Kṛṣṇa brings about through the mechanism of Time occurs at all levels, not just the universal. Kṛṣṇa especially reveals this to Arjuna in terms of the concern which prompted the *Gītā* in the first place - the impending battle. Arjuna now sees the universal form of Kṛṣṇa

1) Yathā pradīptam jvalanam patangā
 viçanti nāçāya samṛddhavegāḥ/
 Tathaiva nāçāya viçanti lokāḥ
 tavāpi vaktrāṇi samṛddhavegāḥ//
 Lelihyase grasamānaḥ samantāl
 lokān samagrānvadanairjvaladbhiḥ/
 Tejobhirāpūrya jagatsamagram
 bhāṣastavogrāḥ pratapanti viṣṇo// Bh.G. 11.29-30.

destroying all the assembled warriors with his dreadful mouths. The events have not yet taken place, but their course and outcome have already been determined. The vision provides a vivid insight into the absolute power of God, here manifested through the process of Time, and the total powerlessness of man:

Strong-armed one, seeing your mighty form with its many mouths, eyes, arms, thighs and feet, bellies and dreadful fangs, (these) worlds are trembling with fright, as am I. All these sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, along with hosts of kings, like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, the son of a sūta (Karna), along with our foremost fighters too, hastening, they enter your terrible mouths with their dreadful fangs; some can (even) be seen stuck between your teeth, with their heads crushed. As the many currents of rivers rush towards the ocean, so these heroes in the world of men enter your blazing mouths.¹

To a terrified and much shaken Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa explains what he has seen:

I am Time, fully developed for the destruction of the worlds, intent here on withdrawing the worlds. Except you, all the warriors who are arrayed in (these) hostile armies will not remain alive. Therefore, stand up (and) win fame; conquering your enemies, rule-and-enjoy a prosperous kingdom. (For) I have destroyed these warriors already; you are merely the instrument, O ambidextrous one.²

Therefore, Kṛṣṇa has already predetermined that all the assembled warriors will meet their destruction; and the fulfillment of the divine intention awaits only

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- 1) Rūpaṃ mahatte bahuvaktranetraṃ
 mahābāho bahubāhūrupādam/
 Bahūdaraṃ bahudaṅṣṭrākaraṇam
 dr̥ṣṭvā lokāḥ pravyathitāstathāham// (23)
 Amī ca tvāṃ dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putrāḥ
 sarve sahaivāvanīpālasaṃghaiḥ/
 Bhīṣmo droṇaḥ sūtaputrastathāsau
 sahāsmadīyairapi yodhamukhyaiḥ// (26)
 Vaktrāṇi te tvaramāṇā viçanti
 daṅṣṭrākaraṇāni bhayānakāni/
 Kecidvilagnā daçanāntareṣu
 saṃdr̥çyante cūrṇitairuttamāṅgaiḥ// (27)
 Yathā nadīnāṃ bahavo ambuvegāḥ
 samudramevābhīmukhā dravanti/
 Tathā tavāmī naralokavīrā
 viçanti vaktrāṇyabhivijvalanti// (28) Bh.G.11.23, 26-28.
- 2) Kālo asmi lokakṣayakṛtpravṛddho
 lokānsamāhartumiha pravṛttaḥ
 rte api tvā na bhaviṣyanti sarve
 ye avasthitāḥ pratyanīkeṣu yodhāḥ//
 Tasmāttvamuttiṣṭha yaço labhasva
 jitvā çatrūnbhūṅkṣva rājyaṃ saṃvṛddham/
 Mayaivaite nihataḥ pūrvameva
 nimittamātraṃ bhava savyasācin// Bh.G. 11.32-33.

the passage of Time. Equally, Kṛṣṇa has predetermined that Arjuna shall be God's chosen instrument for this destruction. In all this, God's power is complete, man's power is meaningless.

So far Kṛṣṇa's immanence has been portrayed in terms of his activity in relationship to the universe, and how this is exercised. The effect is to maintain the individual as a separate and real entity, but to destroy any sense of the individual as a free agent. However, in a more passive sense, doctrines of immanence almost naturally tend towards a thoroughgoing pantheistic interpretation of the relationship between God and the universe. While the *Gītā*, as a whole, is not ultimately pantheistic, parts of it are strongly so in tone. In these sections, Kṛṣṇa is portrayed as entering into the universe, and maintaining or supporting it through his energy. The divine energy, entered into the universe, can be seen manifested in the very essence of everything. The effect of this is to virtually destroy any idea of the individual as a separate and real entity, let alone a free one. The phenomenal individual is swallowed up in God.

For instance, in chapter seven, Kṛṣṇa unequivocally asserts to Arjuna that He (and not Spirit or Nature) is the Highest Reality; and 'All this (universe) is strung on Me like a multitude of pearls on a thread.' By way of illustration, Kṛṣṇa proceeds to identify Himself with the essence of everything, i.e. with the property that is peculiar to each particular category and which distinguishes it from all other categories:

In waters I am the taste, O Kaunteya, in the moon and sun I am the light. In all the *Vedas* I am the sacred syllable *Om*, in ether I am sound, (and) in men I am manliness. In the earth I am pure fragrance, and in fire I am the heat. In all beings I am the life, and in ascetics I am their austerity. O Pārtha, know me as the eternal seed of all beings. Amongst the intelligent I am the intellect, (and) I am the energy amongst those of energy. And I am the strength of the strong, (but strength) free from desire and passion. Bull of the Bhāratas, in beings I am desire, (but desire) not opposed to *dharma*.²

1) Mayi sarvamidaṃ protaṃ sūtre maṇigaṇā iva// Bh.G. 7.7.

2) Raso ahamapsu kaunteya prabhāsmi caṇisūryayoḥ/

If Kṛṣṇa's claim to be the manliness in men, life in all beings, the austerity in ascetics, the primeval seed of all beings, the energy in the energetic, and the strength in the strong, does not destroy the individuality of the phenomenal being, then the claim to be the intellect (*buddhi*) in the intelligent surely does. The *buddhi* is, of course, the critical factor in the salvation or destruction of the individual.

Elsewhere Kṛṣṇa describes how he enters into the earth and supports all plants and creatures with his 'power' or 'strength' (*ojasa*):

Pervading the earth, I support beings with my strength. Becoming *soma*, I nourish all herbs in the form of sap. Becoming fire, I dwell in the body of living beings, (and) together with the inward and outward breath, I digest the four kinds of food.¹

However, in beings Kṛṣṇa is more than just the fire that digests food and thus nourishes physical existence, for: 'And I dwell in the heart of all; from Me arise memory, knowledge and reasoning.'² Though it has been so taken,³ it is difficult to see that this can refer to Kṛṣṇa's indwelling of the individual as the soul. The soul (*ātman*), as we have seen, has nothing to do with memory, knowledge, and reasoning. These belong to the higher psycho-mental categories, the *buddhi* and the *manas*. However, if memory, knowledge and reasoning are derived from the immanent Lord, an unavoidable consequence must be the destruction of any sense of the individual as a separate and real entity.

The most pantheistic of all sections of the *Gītā* is found in chapter ten. In

Pranavaḥ sarvavedeṣu çabdaḥ khe pauruṣaṁ nṛṣu//
 Puṇyo gandhaḥ prthivyāṁ ca tejaçcāsmi vibhāvasau/
 Jīvanaṁ sarvabhūteṣu tapaçcāsmi tapasviṣu//
 Bijaṁ mām sarvabhūtānāṁ viddhi pārtha sanātanam/
 Buddhīrbuddhimatāmasmi tejastejasvināmaham//
 Balaṁ balavatāṁ cāhaṁ kāmarāgaivivarjitam/
 Dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kāmō asmi bharatarṣabha// Bh.G. 7.7-11.

- 1) Gāmāviçya ca bhūtāni dhārayāmyahamojaśā/
 Puṣṇāmi cauṣadhiḥ sarvāḥ somo bhūtvā rasātmakaḥ//
 Ahaṁ vaiçvānaro bhūtvā prāṇināṁ dehamāçritaḥ/
 Prāṇāpānasamāyuktaḥ pacāmyannaṁ caturvidham// Bh.G. 15.13-14.
- 2) Sarvasya cāhaṁ hṛdi saṁniviṣṭo
 mattaḥ smṛtirjñānamapohanaṁ ca/ Bh.G. 15.15.
- 3) See Minor, op.cit., p.427.

this chapter, Kṛṣṇa quite unequivocally asserts that He is the Supreme Being, the Great Lord of the Worlds (*lokamaheṣvara*).¹ An awed Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa to recount the manifestations (*vibhūti*) of His power, by which He pervades the universe, though remaining unchanged Himself (*lokānimāṇstvam vyāpya tiṣṭhasi*), so that he could know and meditate upon Kṛṣṇa the better.²

Of these manifestations, Kṛṣṇa proposes only to recount the essential ones, for 'of the detail there is no end' (*nāstyanto vistarasya*).³ The divine presence, Kṛṣṇa indicates, can be most readily seen at work wherever the very best or ideal part of a particular category of things or beings is seen. As Kṛṣṇa puts it, 'Whatever has a mighty nature, prosperity or strength, understand that this arises from a particle (only) of my energy.'⁴ Of this Kṛṣṇa provides an abundance of illustrations:

O Guḍākeṣa, I am the soul that abides in the body of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all beings. (20) ... Of the Ādityas I am Viṣṇu; of heavenly bodies, the radiant sun. (21) ... Of the *Vedas* I am the *Sama-Veda*; of the gods I am Vāsava; of the senses I am the mind (*manas*); of creatures I am consciousness (*cetana*). (22) Of the Rudras, I am Ṣaṃkara. (23) ... Of the *daityas*, I am Prahlāda. (30) ... of rivers I am the Ganges. (31) ... of those who speak out, I am the speech. (32) ... Of those who cheat (at gambling), I am the dicing; of the energetic, I am the energy; I am victory, I am determination, (and) of the courageous I am the courage. (36) Of the *Vṛṣṇi*'s, I am Vāsudeva, (and) of the Pāṇḍavas I am Arjuna; of sages I am Vyāsa. (37) ... of those endowed with knowledge I am the knowledge. (38) And what is the seed of all beings, O Arjuna, I am that. So there is not a being, moving or stationary, that can exist without Me. (39)⁵

At first sight, the logical conclusion of what we have here is the identification of God and the universe, which would constitute pure pantheism. However, Kṛṣṇa saves the *Gītā* from this position by adding the qualification

1) Bh.G. 10.3.

2) Bh.G. 10.16-17.

3) Bh.G. 10.19.

4) Yadyadvibhūtimatsattvaṃ ṣrīmadūrjitameva vā/

Tattadevāvagaccha tvam mama tejo aṅgasambhavam// Bh.G. 10.41.

5) Ahamātmā guḍākeṣa sarvabhūtāṇāyasthitah/

Ahamādiṣṭva madhyaṃ ca bhūtānāmanta eva ca// (20)

Dyūtaṃ chalayatāmasmi tejastejasvināmaham/

Jayo asmi vyavasāyo asmi sattvaṃ sattvavatāmaham// (36)

Yaccāpi sarvabhūtānāṃ bījaṃ tadahamarjuna/

Na tadasti vinā yatsyānmayā bhūtaṃ carācaram// (39) Bh.G. 10.20,36,39.

that he permeates the universe with but a 'single part' (*ekāṅga*) of Himself.' Ultimately the *Gītā*'s position is not that all is God, but that all is in God. Nevertheless, the consequence remains that the universe is effectively swallowed up in God.

The same fate applies to phenomenal beings. For instance, in the above listing we are told that Kṛṣṇa is the beginning, middle and end of all creatures; and their mind and consciousness and speech as well. Kṛṣṇa is specifically identified as Arjuna amongst Pāṇḍu's sons, and as Vyāsa - the purported author of the *Mahābhārata* - amongst sages. Significantly, Kṛṣṇa is identified as the dicing of those who cheat, which in the context of the *Mahābhārata* must mean that the fraudulent game of dice that lost Yudhiṣṭhira his kingdom and led to the destruction of God's enemies was a product of the manifestation of the divine power in the universe, and not of the meaningful actions of the individual participants. Also, victory, determination, and courage are attributed to manifestations of the divine immanence, and not to the real and meaningful actions of the individuals involved. The same is the case with the knowledge of the wise, which is significant given the importance attributed to *jñāna* for individual salvation. And as the 'seed' (*bīja*) of all beings, Kṛṣṇa is their origin and their very essence. The individual, then, could not exist unless indwelt by Kṛṣṇa, not just as the soul, but also by Kṛṣṇa as the immanent divine power. In the end, there is nothing left of the individual as a distinct and real entity, let alone a free one.

Given that *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* together form the body of God, there could be cause for wondering whether it is not superfluous to talk at all of individual freedom in the *Gītā*. However, the situation can be viewed from another angle.

1) Bh.G. 10.42.

The actual principle in the *Gītā* is unity in diversity. Thus there is unity in that *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are parts of God, but diversity in that they are separate, real and distinct parts of God. They are not God in His completeness. In fact, Kṛṣṇa sets the ground rules for a curious divine game (the purpose of which is never explained) in which one part of Him (the *ātman* or soul) is to be freed from another part of Him (Nature, i.e. the psychosomatic body) and to return to its source, the Supernatural Personality of God.

To this extent, then, we may consider the degree of freedom of the parts within the context of the whole. Of these 'parts' it is fair to say that the *Gītā*'s concern is definitely more with the spiritual side of man than the material. Therefore, it is not surprising that on the problem of action and freedom, the *Gītā*'s views are much more consistently and closely thought out on the position of the soul (Spirit) than on the position of the phenomenal individual (Nature). The soul, the *Gītā* insists, does not and cannot act, and likewise it is eternally free. The fact that it appears to act, and to be bonded and limited, is merely the greatest delusion of all. In its essence the soul is immutable, limitless and free.

The *Gītā*'s position on the phenomenal individual as a free agent is far less clear. Written at a time when many accepted beliefs and institutions were under serious question and challenge, the *Gītā* attempts to mediate amongst a wide range of beliefs to establish a broader and more attractive religious basis for orthodoxy. Therefore, the author of the *Gītā* attempts to marry together many contemporary beliefs and institutions - reinterpreted as necessary - the common denominator being that all are subordinated to the might and majesty of the *Gītā*'s personal God. It would be too much to expect that such an exercise would be uniformly successful, and the problem of the nature of human action and human freedom is certainly one of the *Gītā*'s less successful parts. While the *Gītā* attempts to blend together the emphasis of *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* on human action and freedom with the emphasis of *bhaktiyoga* on salvation through

God's grace, this compromise is endangered by the *Gītā*'s obvious preference for *bhaktiyoga* alone. Whatsmore, the *Gītā* endangers even the position of *bhaktiyoga*, with its limited emphasis on human action and freedom, by so building up the position of its personal God that it destroys any position left for man.

Conclusion

The intention of this thesis has been to trace in India's great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, the development of certain fundamental ideas concerning one of the most persistent concerns of Indian thought, the nature of human action. As such, it is important to note, the thesis is an exercise not in philosophy or Indology but the history of ideas. However, the approach adopted in this thesis is best considered in the context of the approach of Western scholarship to the study of the *Mahābhārata*.

For such great nineteenth century Sanskrit scholars as Bopp, Lassen, the Holtzmanns, Oldenberg, Dahlmann, Ludwig, Weber, Sorensen, Bühler, von Schroeder, Winternitz and Hopkins questions concerning the origins and development of the *Mahābhārata* were of much learned interest and seemingly perennial debate. Various theories were evolved to answer these questions, and they may be considered under three broad headings. The most widely accepted was the so-called 'analytical' theory, perhaps most articulately put by E. Washburn Hopkins. What most struck many early investigators of the *Mahābhārata* was the difficulty of reconciling the strictly epic portions with the vast mass of loosely attached didactic and moral material. Hopkins, especially, carefully analysed what the text itself actually had to say, and impressed by the great differences in diction, meter, language, tone and ideas to be found in the text, he persuasively concluded that the *Mahābhārata* was a compilation consisting of various layers that had been grafted over the centuries onto what was originally a comparatively small but true epic core.

In the course of time, Hopkins' views and methods have come to be widely accepted by Western scholarship. A few brave scholars, such as Sorensen, made efforts to actually 'reconstruct' the original Epic poem, while Hopkins and others were more content with the task of trying to establish satisfactory objective criteria for ascertaining the different layers. While Sorensen's effort was no doubt hopelessly misguided, the same cannot be said for the effort to establish the internal history of the *Mahābhārata* - for the text undeniably does have a history. However, objective criteria have proved elusive, and results remain in the realm of speculation. The task has proved largely insuperable.

A second theory to explain the origins and development of the Epic was the so-called 'inversion' theory proposed by the German Adolph Holtzmann, who was intrigued by the apparent contradiction that in the great battle it is the Pāṇḍavas who are prone to practise deceit and fraud,

while the Kauravas fight in accordance with the accepted rules of battle. Put simply, Holtzmann argued that in the core Epic the Kurus and not the Pāṇḍavas were the heroes, but subsequently, as the story grew in popularity, descendants of the victorious Pāṇḍavas commanded their court bards to re-write the story. Traces of the older partiality for the Kauras, Holtzmann argued, were still reflected in the villainy of the Pāṇḍavas in battle, and the deceit and cunning of Kṛṣṇa. While other scholars did refine the theory, the difficulty remains that it raises more problems than it solves, and the theory has been largely abandoned.

A third approach was the 'one author' theory first proposed by the Jesuit priest Joseph Dahlmann, who argued that the *Mahābhārata* in its received form was the unified work of a single inspired bard who reworked existing legends, myths, lawbooks and philosophical tracts into one immense epic with the aim of providing in a popular form suitable standards of law and conduct (*dharma*) for the masses. Thus, the main purpose of the Epic bard was didactic, and in Dahlmann's view the story of the feud between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas was not historically authentic but a symbolic representation of the battle between good and evil. Ignoring as it does the very striking variations in style, language, and versification in the different parts of the *Mahābhārata* and the countless contradictions within the text, the theory was for the most part greeted with utter disbelief. Nevertheless, Dahlmann's attempt to understand the work as a whole, instead of dissecting it into its parts, has drawn the approval of Indian scholars, even if they concede the untenability of his conclusions. Thus Sukthankar commends Dahlmann's efforts for showing 'that the relation between the narrative and the didactic matter in our epic was definitely not of a casual character, but was intentional and purposive, concluding therefrom that it was impossible to separate the two elements without destroying or mutilating the poem'.¹

However, from being a principal subject of academic concern last century, the *Mahābhārata*, as Professor van Buitenen notes, has come to

1) See Sukthankar, *op.cit.*, pp.20-21, also Dandekar, *op.cit.*, pp.266-67. The views and theories of these nineteenth century scholars are critically discussed in V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, pp.1-31; B.A. van Nooten, *The Mahābhārata*, pp.43-46; 'The Mahābhārata: Origin and Growth', in R.N. Dandekar, *Exercises in Indology*, pp.266-276; and G.J. Held, *The Mahābhārata: An Ethnological Study*, pp.1-34.

form 'a conspicuous hiatus in Western scholarship'¹ for the bulk of the century. There are various reasons why twentieth century scholars have proved so chary of studying the *Mahābhārata*. Perhaps the foremost reasons are the enormous scale of the text and its complicated multiform character. As van Buitenen writes:

... the text is so dismally intractable. Its sheer size is really forbidding. It was the rare scholar who confidently commanded the whole... anyone who really wished to delve into *The Mahābhārata* had to resign himself to five years or so simply to familiarize himself with it, and with far from certain results.²

According to Held, it is not primarily the magnitude of the text itself which is in the beginning the main obstacle:

It is essentially the peculiar composition of the work, consisting of almost 100,000 ślokas, that makes it so uncommonly difficult. At first sight it seems to be a bizarre accumulation of all sorts of heterogeneous elements, witnessing only to an almost morbid mania for collecting, at least if it did not sometimes strike us as being so artless and simple.³

The completion of a Critical Edition has at least improved the promise of results, even if the scale of the undertaking remains daunting.

Another difficulty was that most Western Sanskrit scholars came to the area from a background in classical studies and philology. This predisposed them towards a study of the Vedic texts, especially for what they revealed about early Indo-European thought, literature and language; or towards Buddhism which, with its more historical and philosophical dimension, was better attuned to the Western mind. By contrast, the Epics (not to speak of the *Purāṇas* and *Tantras*) did not conform to any of the accepted Western literary categories, let alone their respective critical standards. The *Mahābhārata* was not a purely religious work nor an Epic in the Homeric sense, nor a romance, nor a philosophical treatise, although it did contain all these forms and more. And by Western standards, India's great Epic seemed amorphous, disorganised, unhistorical, overgrown with interpolations, and fatally corrupted with Brahmanical revisions. Critics have variously referred to the *Mahābhārata* as a 'literary jungle', a 'literary monstrosity'.⁴ Oldenberg reflects the prevailing judgement

1) J.A.B. van Buitenen (trans.), *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, p.xxxv.

2) *Ibid.*, p.xxxiv.

3) Held, *op.cit.*, p.1.

4) van Nooten, *op.cit.*, p.2.

as follows: 'The *Mahābhārata* began its existence as a simple epic narrative. It became, in course of centuries, the most monstrous chaos.'¹ Most Western critics, writes V.S. Sukthankar, 'have uniformly felt and exhibited a characteristic uneasiness - I may say helplessness - when faced with the - to them unnatural - phenomenon of an avowedly narrative poem in which the 'moral', so to say, is nearly four times as long as the story itself.'²

While nineteenth century scholars reacted by trying to dissect the *Mahābhārata* into its early and later layers in search of the elusive original Epic, amongst twentieth century scholars there seems to have been an almost silent judgement that the popular literature of Hinduism is not really worthy of study compared to the Vedic literature and Hindu philosophical works.³ There can be little doubt that, given the place it occupies in the view of the Hindu believer, surprisingly little effort has been made to analyse the evidence of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole for what it reveals about the development and the central ideas of the Hindu tradition. Certain parts, such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and the Nala and Ākuntala stories have been extracted and given special attention. But this is to fragmentize the Epic, and tacitly to admit that study of the work as a whole was either too formidable or was not worth the effort.

Admittedly, since the Second World War there has been a certain revival of interest in the study of the *Mahābhārata* among Western scholars - but the scale remains limited. Thus in 1947 the Swedish scholar Stig Wikander applied Georges Dumézil's tri-functional categorisation of Indo-European religion and society⁴ to the *Mahābhārata*, the results of which have been published in his multi-volume *Mythe et épopée*.⁵ However, it may be suggested that, far from listening to what the text itself had to

1) Cited in Sukthankar, *op.cit.*, p.1.

2) *Ibid.*, p.4.

3) See D. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, p.3.

4) Stig Wikander, 'Pāṇḍavasagen och Mahābhārata mythiska förutsättningar' in *Religion och Bibel*, vol.6 (1947).

5) vol.1: *L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens* (1968); vol.2: *Types épiques indo-européens: un héros, un sorcier, un roi* (1971). For a discussion of the views of Dumézil, and his followers and critics, see C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*.

say, this approach imposes dubious concepts which add little or nothing to our understanding of the material.

More recently, two American scholars, Alf Hiltebeitel and J. Bruce Long, have chosen to concentrate on the *Mahābhārata*, publishing various studies on different aspects of the work. But Hiltebeitel, at least, often seems more intent on using the Epic as a testing ground for Dumézil's categories.¹

Some French scholars have also shown a renewed interest in questions concerning the origin and development of the Epic. The most distinctive feature of their approach is the assumption that the *Mahābhārata* as a whole constitutes one gigantic myth and should be so treated. Consequently, the direction of their work has been to revive interest in holistic interpretations. In the process, they have either forgotten or chosen to ignore the historical dimension of the text. Madeleine Biarreau, for instance, advises that we must resist any 'hypotheses d'ordre historique'.² Arguing that all versions of myths found in the *Mahābhārata* are simultaneous and must be interpreted in concert, Professor Biarreau has called into question the whole rationale of the Critical Edition³ which aims 'to reconstruct the oldest form of the text which it is possible to reach, on the basis of the manuscript material available';⁴ a stupendous labour which returns us to a text of about the sixth century A.D.⁵

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- 1) See J. Bruce Long, 'Life Out of Death: A Structural Analysis of the Myth of the "Churning of the Ocean of Milk"', in B.L. Smith (ed.), *Hinduism: New Essays in the history of Religions* and 'The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*', in W.D. O'Flaherty (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, pp.38-60. A. Hiltebeitel, 'The Mahābhārata and Hindu Eschatology', *History of Religions*, vol.12 (1972); 'Nahuṣa in the Skies: A Human King of Heaven', *History of Religions*, vol.16 (1976); 'Çiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī', *History of Religions*, vol.20 (1980); 'The Two Kṛṣṇas on One Chariot: Upaniṣadic Imagery and Epic Mythology', *History of Religions*, vol.24 (1984); 'The Burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest', in Smith (ed.), *op.cit.*; *The Ritual of Battle: Kṛṣṇa in the Mahābhārata* (1976).
 - 2) M. Biarreau, 'Conférence de Madeleine Biarreau', *Annuaire*, vol.7 (19), p.170, cited in J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol.3, p.143.
 - 3) M. Biarreau, 'Some more considerations about textual criticism', *Purāṇa*, vol.x, no.2 (1968), and 'The Story of Arjuna Kārtavīrya without Reconstruction', *Purāṇa*, vol.xii, no.2 (1970). See the response by V.M. Bedekar, 'Principles of *Mahābhārata* textual criticism: the need for a restatement', *Purāṇa*, vol.11 (1969), pt.2; and the discussion by J.A.B. Buitenen (trans. and ed.), *The Mahābhārata*, vol.3, pp.142-54.
 - 4) V.S. Sukthankar, 'Prolegomena', *The Adiparvan*, p.lxxxvi. (Italics in original.)
 - 5) See van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol.3, p.151.

Having reviewed the very checkered history of the *Mahābhārata* in Western scholarship, we may now return to the approach taken in this thesis. To begin with, the thesis is underpinned by certain important presuppositions.

The first is that a balanced understanding of the development of the Hindu tradition cannot be obtained without taking full account of the evidence of the *Mahābhārata*. The weakness in Western reservations about the *Mahābhārata* as a literary work, and predilection for dissecting the text in search of its origins, is that it has more than stood the test of time in its homeland. Admittedly India's love of the work throughout the centuries, and its importance in the Hindu tradition, have not gone unnoticed amongst Western critics. Thus Oldenberg who, as we saw above, had pronounced the Epic to be a chaos, still felt that 'in the *Mahābhārata* breathes the united souls of India, and the individual souls of her people'.¹ Still, most Western scholars have continued to view the Epic through Western eyes, ignoring the way it is seen in its homeland. As V.S. Sukthankar, the editor of the Critical Edition, complains:

Is it not passing strange that, notwithstanding the repeated and dogged attempts of Western savants to demonstrate that our *Mahābhārata* is but an unintelligible conglomerate of disjointed pieces, without any meaning as a whole, the epic should always have occupied in Indian antiquity an eminent position and uniformly enjoyed the highest reputation? It was used, we are told, as a book of education for the young Bāṇa's time, like the Iliad in Hellenic Greece. It has inspired the poets and dramatists of India as a quarry for their plots and ideas. It has attracted in the past celebrated Indian philosophers like Ācārya Ṣaṃkara and Kumārila, famous Indian saints like Jñāneṣvar and Ramdas, and distinguished Indian rulers like Akbar and Shivaji. This Epic of the Bhāratas had moreover penetrated to the farthest extremities of Greater India. It had conquered not only Burma and Siam, but even the distant islands of Java and Bali. The immortal stories of this epic have been carved on the walls of the temples of these peoples by their sculptors, painted on their canvasses by their artists, acted in the wayangs of their showmen. What is more remarkable still is that this epic - along with the *Rāmāyana* - is still living and throbbing in the lives of the Indian people - not merely of the intelligentsia, but also of the illiterate and inarticulate masses ... The grand legends of the Great War are even now recited and expounded in kings' palaces and in peasants' huts to an enraptured audience.²

1) Cited in Dandekar, op.cit., p.265.

2) Sukthankar, op.cit., p.29.

The importance of the Epics for Indians of all categories is a fact that is perhaps too easily set aside or discounted amongst Western scholars. Here we may further cite the views of R.N. Dandekar, a later editor of the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*. Dandekar maintains that despite the theoretical importance of the Vedas

the literary works which have left an abiding imprint on the socio-religious life sponsored by Hinduism, are not so much the *Veda* as the popular epics. Even, among these popular epics, if there is any one single work which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of the life and thought of the Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influences, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the *Mahābhārata*, the great national epic of India.¹

We may therefore fully agree with van Buitenen - whose sympathies for the text cannot be doubted - when he writes that 'Western erudition about the course of Indian civilisation is quite incomplete without a full and conscious absorption into it of the evidence of *The Mahābhārata*'.² To date, this process has scarcely begun. For the reasons considered above, most scholars have preferred a quick trip through the Epic as part of some broader enterprise, rather than a prolonged stay. And, as we have seen, those scholars who have explored the Epic in depth have for the most part been more interested in determining how it is put together than in the significance of its contents as such.³

The second presupposition upon which this thesis is based is that if the evidence of the Epic is to be properly evaluated, the work should be approached the way it is viewed in India - as a unitary, complete work of art or literature. This is not to deny the importance of history in its assessment, but it does repudiate the view that the didactic insertions are any less important than the central story itself. Despite Western misgivings about the amorphous nature of the text, we should

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- 1) Dandekar, *op.cit.*, p.263.
- 2) van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol.1, p.xxxv.
- 3) As Held puts it: 'The Epic has been studied overmuch from the purely philological side, with the typical result, that the 'original Epic' loomed up in the imagination of scholars as the one object of their scientific quest, whereas its discovery can only be considered of any great importance from the point of view of its value to the science of philology proper, and cannot be made to serve as a criterion, a standard by which to judge the nature of the cultural elements therein described.' Held, *op.cit.*, p.29.

perhaps consider that it may never have been the intention of the bardic authors to present a coherent and systematic exposition. Here we should always recall the *Mahābhārata*'s own self-characterisation: 'O Bull among Bhāratas, what is (found) here on Duty, on Profit, on Pleasure, and on Salvation, that is (found) elsewhere. (But) what is not here, that is nowhere else.'¹ Indeed, we should contemplate, as does van Nooten, that this was the conscious purpose of the Epic compilers:

If we assume that the genius of a highly cultured group of Brahmins in the first centuries of our era has welded together a mass of the most incredibly dissimilar stories with the aim of establishing a new Hindu tradition in opposition to the prevailing Buddhist doctrines, then we can only marvel at their success. From temple to temple, from court to court, from festival to festival the Epic was carried, until it became part of the conscious heritage of every Hindu, Jain, Sikh growing up in India.²

Therefore, in any consideration of the *Mahābhārata* the uncommonly heterogeneous nature of the text should simply be accepted as a fact.

And for the text of the *Mahābhārata* it is the Critical Edition that we should take as our standard. This is not to denigrate the older attempts to determine how the text evolved from its simple beginnings. But the nature of the evidence for this task is so thin or vicarious that any solutions offered must necessarily be very speculative. At present, then, the only securely dateable guide we have to the contents of the *Mahābhārata* is the approximately sixth century A.D. text provided by the Critical Edition. For the more historically minded Western tradition, this may not seem much, but it is no reason to make light of the evidence it provides in the development of so many aspects of the Hindu tradition. For this reason, too, it is impossible to accept the holistic approaches of more recent French scholars. It is surely undeniable that the *Mahābhārata* itself, as reconstituted in the Critical Edition, is an historical event with a history that covers perhaps some eight centuries, a period which saw a vast and profound religious re-orientation on the Indian sub-continent, in which the groundwork of modern Hinduism was laid. Thus the sixth century Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* is an invaluable

1) Ādiparvan, 56.33.

2) van Nooten, op.cit., p.2.

tool for exploring continuities and discontinuities in the Hindu tradition, whether the principal interest of the scholar is the Epic itself, or the Vedic or Purāṇic periods. To ignore this simple fact is surely to impoverish our understanding of the development of Hinduism and greatly to reduce the tremendous potential value of the Epic as a source for understanding this process.

A third presupposition in this study, and one of the utmost importance, is that in any consideration of the text as a whole, one should listen to what the text itself has to say and not to what it does not say. (This, it may be noted in passing, is surely one of the problems in applying Dumézil's categories to the *Mahābhārata*.) This desideratum has throughout guided the approach taken in this thesis. For instance, some of the ideas and issues discussed were to be subsequently considered by the major Indian schools of philosophy in much greater depth and sophistication. But it is important to hear what the *Mahābhārata* has to say, and not to dismiss the importance of the Epic's ideas by comparison or to read the importance that ideas may subsequently have assumed backwards into the Epic. The Epic treatment of the idea of karma is perhaps a case in point. The only true guide to the history and importance of ideas in the Epic period is the Epic text itself. For the same reason, in this thesis we have considered it important to listen to the terms that the text itself uses to consider such problems as fate, freedom and predestination, instead of imposing definitions drawn from our Western experience. For instance, Western definitions of fate, which normally stress the invariable effect of the force, would be quite unsuitable to apply to the Epic material, which takes a more flexible approach to the problem. To apply definitions drawn from the Western experience would merely limit and mutilate the Indian approach.

The purpose of the thesis, then, has been to examine in detail the development of ideas concerning the broad question of the nature of human action within the context of the *Mahābhārata*. It has not been part of my task to consider how these ideas are developed in later philosophical systems or theories, or to consider them in relationship to other cognate ideas. The task, it should be noted, has only been undertaken in the

most limited fashion before,¹ and to this extent the thesis purports to provide a modest contribution to our detailed understanding of an important aspect of this great Epic.

Now, as indicated in the introduction, the problem of the nature of human action, in its many ramifications, is one that has much preoccupied Indian thinkers over the centuries. As Professor van Buitenen notes: 'The attention and deliberation devoted by Indian, especially Hindu, thinkers to the nature of actions, their components, their conditions, and their consequences are to the non-Indian student staggering. This phenomenon began with the earliest of the Vedas and has continued to this day.'² Of particular interest for Indian thinkers, be they philosophers or story-tellers, has been the perennial question of the meaningfulness and efficacy of human action, a problem that has perhaps been of varying concern of most cultural traditions.

If we ask ourselves why Indian thinkers were so fascinated with the problem, the answer would seem to lie principally in certain persistent and insistent cultural concerns. Now, before we can truly understand a culture, we must have some understanding of the ultimate values, or the highest ideals, that are of preeminent importance in the lives of the people of that culture. We have already seen that in Hinduism the main competing value systems are those of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*.

In the developed Hindu tradition, the main literary proponents of *nivṛtti* prove to be the schools of Hindu philosophy, and their paramount concern is the attainment of *mokṣa* or liberation from the bondage of phenomenal existence. According to Professor Karl Potter, the mainstream of Western philosophy has upheld the Platonic view of the ultimate value of human nature, a view which 'presupposed that man's nature was limited, that his perfection consisted in the control of the passions by the

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- 1) For previous studies that substantially relate to the *Mahābhārata*'s treatment of the topic, see J. Bruce Long, 'The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*', on W.D. O'Flaherty (ed.) *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, G.N. Chakravarty, 'The Idea of Fate and Freedom in the *Mahābhārata*', *Poona Orientalist*, vol. 20 (1955), H.G. Narahari, 'Karma and Reincarnation in the *Mahābhārata*', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol. 27 (1946), E.W. Hopkins, 'Modifications of the Karma Doctrine', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1906 and 1907.
 - 2) J.A.B. van Buitenen (ed. and trans.) *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata*, p.14.

intellect, so that the reasoned life was the best life, balance of soul was of the essence, and this balance was defined in terms both of the encouragement of the rational faculty and the discouragement of the appetites.¹ The highest value for man, and the ultimate source of any happiness that was within his reach, was morality which lay in the exercise of his reason and the subjugation of his passions. By contrast, Indian philosophy has pursued a course which is quite unpalatable to the mainstream of Western thinking. As Professor Potter explains it:

Indian philosophy does in fact elevate power, control, or freedom to a supereminent position above rational morality... for better or worse, the ultimate value recognized by classical Hinduism in its most sophisticated sources is not morality but freedom, not rational self-control in the interests of the community's welfare but complete control over one's environment - something which includes self-control but also includes control of others and even control of the physical sources of power in the universe.²

In Indian philosophy, the ideal individual who is celebrated is the one who has attained total mastery of himself and his environment - the *yogin* and the *guru*.

However, the necessary condition of the belief in the unlimited potentiality of mortal man to attain power, control and freedom was the conviction that the individual was sufficiently free from external influences to be able to adopt and successfully pursue, by his own unaided efforts, a path that led to his freedom and salvation. That unlimited potentiality is implied in the theory of Self (*ātman*) as exposed in the *Bhagavadgītā*, and partly in the *Anugītā* and *Mokṣadharmā*. (Here, by the way, it is very important to note that *ātman* was not postulated in the *Bhagavadgītā* but treated as already, though not fully and not fully consciously, accepted.) The abstract potentiality lies with *ātman* which, however, as we know it in the *Bhagavadgītā*, does not itself act and is to be liberated from that which does act. In other words, the meaningfulness of human action finds its only ontological support in *ātman* which knows the action. Therefore the course of events itself lies in the sphere of *artha* and *dharma*. The last serves as an absolutely necessary concept of human, and any other, activity and constitutes the necessary bridge between action itself and *ātmanic* inactivity. That is,

1) Karl H. Potter, Presuppositions of India's Philosophies, p.1.

2) Ibid., p.3.

we are given to understand the very term 'meaning' (*artha* more often than not) as always, in the *Mahābhārata*, *dharmic*, or related to *dharma* in one way or the other. Man, in short, was a meaningful causal agent capable of affecting the course of events. As a consequence, in the developed schools of Indian philosophy, 'The problem of freedom and causation ... is the source of all systematic Indian philosophy of which we know, except for what little still remains of skeptic and fatalist views - that even these are pertinent to that problem in that they are what everyone else is concerned to refute.'¹ It was only through a satisfactory solution to the problem of causation and human agency that Indian thinkers could 'prove' to others, not to speak of themselves, that the individual could successfully pursue a path to freedom or *mokṣa*. In the more considered works of Indian philosophy, both orthodox and heterodox, we therefore find scrupulous attention given

to the nature of the relationship between events or things, in particular those relationships we call causal - ones which hold between the types of events or things which make up the sequences which pertain to the ultimate purpose of complete freedom, i.e., the events about which they care. Those relationships cannot be too strong, or we are subject to forces beyond our control; but neither can they be too weak, or we are unable to steer our course.²

In the Epic, as we have seen, Indian philosophy was still in its beginnings. While it emphasises the attainment of *mokṣa* through individual effort and knowledge, it is not yet concerned to provide the sort of sophisticated analyses of the causal process that are to be found in the developed schools of Indian philosophy. Nevertheless, the ideal of *mokṣa* in Hindu culture ensured that questions concerning the nature and efficacy of human action would be towards the top of any Indian intellectual agenda.

That is why as an ultimate ideal *mokṣa* was either of little concern or an unattainable aspiration for the great bulk of society. The highest ideal to which they could reasonably aspire - and to which they were urged to aspire - was *dharmic* and was the unfailing fulfillment of their *varṇāśrama* duties, or their *svadharma*. And *dharma*, as we have noted before, is easily the foremost concern of the Epic bards, and certainly

1) *Ibid.*, p.94.

2) *Ibid.*, p.94.

of much greater concern than *mokṣa*. The very attempt by Kṛṣṇa to arouse Arjuna to the understanding of *ātman* was, in itself, also *dharmaic*, because it is focussed on Arjuna's own *dharma* of which this understanding was to become a part. However, adherence to *dharma* made more sense if it was believed that human choices and actions were meaningful and could influence the course of events. Without this belief, an attitude of fatalistic resignation or outright hedonism made as much sense as the fulfillment of social duties. Therefore, the ideal of *dharma* in Hindu culture also guaranteed that the nature and efficacy of human action would be of the highest concern to orthodox thinkers.

Now, in the *Mahābhārata*, the problem of the meaningfulness of human action, in one form or another, is almost everywhere to be found. However, there is no attempt to develop any systematic discussion, let alone an ordered philosophical analysis of the problem, for the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. Nevertheless, this is in keeping with the *Mahābhārata*'s own self-proclaimed heterogeneous nature. It was also in keeping with the *Mahābhārata*'s intention to being a popular work, designed to appeal to people of all backgrounds and capacities. As Sukthankar puts it, the *Mahābhārata* was 'a traditional book belonging to the people. The work was evidently meant to be a tome of genuine popular interest, one that should be read, studied and meditated on by all classes of the Indian people, not only by the learned Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, but also by Vaiṣyas and Cūdras - the fifth Veda (Pañcamo vedah), the new Veda of all people, irrespective of caste and creed.'¹

Just as the work was designed to appeal to people of all backgrounds and capacities, then so was the problem for the most part presented in the same more popular fashion. Instead of being presented as an abstract issue for philosophical disquisition, it is a problem that concerns the confusions and doubts of human beings trying to cope with the stresses of life. Appropriately, it is Yudhiṣṭhira's personal difficulties that provide the immediate occasion for many of the *Mahābhārata*'s discussions concerning human action and causal agency; and in keeping with the personal nature of the situation, the discussion generally ranges freely over the possibilities. What it lacks in precision and certainly, the Epic debate makes up for in being wide-ranging and questioning.

However, this catholic attitude creates considerable problems when it comes to arranging the Epic's ideas into an ordered fashion. In this thesis, while it has seemed most appropriate to arrange the material

1) Sukthankar, *op.cit.*, p.23.

under the headings of karma, predestination, fate and free-will, with a separate chapter for the *Bhagavadgītā*, there is still considerable variation of view within each chapter.

The best known Hindu answer for the problem of human action and causal agency is of course the doctrine of karma. And formally, at least, the doctrine of karma is an ideal compromise answer to the difficulties of reconciling determinism and free-will for, as we have seen, it accepts the importance of both in the lot of the individual, viewed as an entity transmigrating through time. Here it is very important to note that, speaking of the whole *Mahābhārata* and not only of the *Bhagavadgītā*, we have to take into account that the individual as the 'transmigrating entity' cannot be mechanically identified with *ātman*, though formally it is very often the case. The concept of individual here suggests that it remains in the sphere of *dharma* or, more exactly, that it is a kind of ultimate and finite unit of *dharma*, though, as has already been said, its very core is *ātmanic*. Moreover, speaking together with the authors of the philosophical parts and sections of the *Mahābhārata*, we should stress the dual nature of the individual; only taken as an agent or actor, is it *dharmic*, whereas as a knower of action, it is *ātmanic*. From this it follows that karma itself, if looked at in its relation to transmigration, is considerably closer conceptually to *dharma* than to *ātman* or, to put it even more precisely, an understanding of karms seems to be far more related to the understanding of *dharma* than to that of *ātman*. Now, in the Epic the detailed expositions of the karma doctrine can be numbered on one hand. The most distinctive feature of these accounts is that they treat man as an individual. Whereas normally an Indian is a mere point in a complicated web or social relationships, in these descriptions the 'individual' is extracted from the social setting and treated in isolation.

Whatever the differences in approach and detail - and they are considerable - these accounts are agreed that all actions (good and bad) necessarily produce a consequent effect or 'fruit', and that every individual, in the course of successive existences reaps the 'fruit' of his own actions performed in previous existences. Thus, what happens to an individual in this life is determined by what the individual has done in previous lives; and what will happen to the individual in future lives is being determined by what is done in this life (although the ability to choose freely is of course constrained by the effect of past

karma, and this creates complexities that in the Epic are only satisfactorily considered in the *Bhagavadgītā*). Therefore, human actions and choices in this life were meaningful and significant. It followed - and it is so maintained - that no one other than the individual himself should be held responsible for his state of existence, present or future. The individual alone - and no other - must enjoy the fruits, good or bad, of his own past deeds. A man only obtained the fruit of his own karma: he never enjoyed the good fruit of others nor suffered for the sins of others. Therefore man alone, viewed as an entity transmigrating through time, was the arbiter of his own destiny; and thus he was, and should feel, free from subjection to all outside forces that were beyond his control. The view of karma put forward in these expositions may be described as being individual, non-transferable, non-pardonable, non-expiable and inexorable.

Beyond this, many crucial problems with respect to the doctrine of karma are left unaddressed. In particular, the actual mechanics by which the soul with its associated karmic consequences finds its way into the womb which will give it birth into a family of the moral and social standing appropriate to that soul's past is nowhere made clear; nor even is the nature of the transmigrating soul. Nor do the Epic sages consider whether karmic consequences are a moral or a physical entity; and if the former, then how do moral entities such as good and bad acts become attached to and transported by physical entities such as the bodily constituents, wind, fire, water, breath, sperm and blood? Nor do the detailed expositions of karma themselves properly contemplate that man is a social creature, and it may well be asked how the individual can enjoy or suffer the consequences of his karma without affecting and being affected by the karma of others. In many parts of the *Mahābhārata* it is simply assumed that the karma of one does affect the karma of others, but there is no analysis to be found which attempts to reconcile this view with the individual interpretation. In this connection I would like to point out that the concept of karma in the *Mahābhārata* is itself an interpretational concept, that is, the concept by means of which other things are interpreted and, strictly speaking, cannot find its own unambiguous interpretation. That is why the very fact of one's awareness of the karmic forces which are at work in one's own particular case or instance can in no way be regarded as a theory of karma; such a theory cannot be found in the text.

Now, from the evidence of the text, we have argued that this individualistic, non-transferable and inexorable doctrine of karma,

much as it might be an ideal compromise solution to the problem of fate and free-will, finds little favour with the *pravṛtti* or this worldly side of Hinduism which predominates in the *Mahābhārata*. For the orthodox *pravṛtti* tradition the implications of the true doctrine of karma, which made all individuals alone responsible for their own destiny, were simply too difficult, and more especially as they were loaded in favour of those who called for the renunciation of all the social duties the orthodox held so dear. We may, of course, well wonder why the Epic sages bothered at all with the individualistic interpretation of karma. At least part of the answer must be that they could not ignore it. The difficulty was that this view of karma had already found favour in the Upaniṣads¹ which of course had been accorded the status of *gruti* or revealed scripture. It was thus difficult for later Hindu thinkers not to recognise the idea in their writings. But, as we have seen, this view of karma was considered an invaluable support for that most pressing of concerns for the Epic sages, the *dharma*. By its recognition of some degree of human causal agency and its uncompromising assertion that, whatever appearances, the good ultimately received their reward and the bad their due punishment, it provided a convincing rationale for adherence to *dharma* - no matter how distasteful one's ordained duty in life.

Nevertheless, having accepted or inherited the new doctrine, the Epic authors had to find a solution for its less palatable consequences. The task was not a difficult one. In the *Mahābhārata*, they simply continued and further developed and codified the numerous means that had been current from perhaps time immemorial, and certainly from the time of the *Vedas*, for the abrogation or the passing on of the consequences of one's actions. But from this standpoint, karma does not provide any true solution to the dichotomy of fate and free-will; and it could all too easily seem just another term for the workings of inscrutable fate. It was essential to the individual doctrine of karma that the individual in this life, viewed as an entity through time, should feel directly responsible for the fruition of past karma, both good and bad, from previous lives. However, the depth of the *Mahābhārata*'s concern with ways of avoiding the consequences of sin or passing them on could only serve to destroy this sense of direct responsibility, for the emphasis

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1) See S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, 'Karma: Individual and Collective' in S.S. Rama Rao Pappu (ed.), The dimensions of Karma, pp.292-99.

is not so much on facing up to the consequences of sin as on escaping them. The consequence could only be a refusal truly to accept that the fruition of past deeds in this life - especially wrongs - was really the current individual's direct responsibility. And certainly there is a marked lack of willingness amongst the Epic characters to accept karmic blame. The deterministic side of the law of karma, then, could easily take on the aspect of an impersonal external force beyond his control which was in every way comparable to the workings of fate or the interference of the gods. As well, if sin and merit could be freely transferred to others, be they family or not, then the individual scarcely constituted an autonomous entity in charge of his own destiny. External factors that were beyond his control could be just as important in determining the individual's lot as his own actions. Again, the workings of past karma could seem little different to those of fate.

Thus, offered an explanation of human action that provided a compromise position between determinism, and free-will, and that freed mortals from the 'oppressive' unpredictability of fate and predestination, the orthodox found the burden too great. And presumably, too, the burden was too great for those who chose to follow the *nivṛtti* way; for they did choose to renounce their social obligations, which were an all too fertile source of karmic consequences. Thus, while the individual doctrine of karma is undeniably the best known and most regarded of the Epic's theories concerning human action and causal agency, in practice its importance in the Epic is seriously limited, and certainly as an idea it is less prominent than other notions of causation such as fate, Time and predestination.

For the contemporary mind, ideas of fate and predestination may seem odd - curious hangovers from more unsophisticated times - and not quite worth the dignity of serious study. For instance, the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle has written that 'No philosopher of the first or second rank has defended fatalism or been at great pains to attack it'.¹ This may perhaps be true for the contemporary West, but in the past these ideas have undoubtedly exercised many great minds, and not just in India. However, our contemporary reluctance to give such ideas their proper due is in danger of leaving a serious gap in the history of ideas.

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1) G. Ryle, Dilemmas, p.28, cited in R.T. Blackwood and A.L. Herman (eds.), Problems in Philosophy: West and East, p.357.

In this thesis, the chapter on predestination is easily the longest, and this alone reflects the importance in the Epic of the idea that the destiny of the individual is controlled from the beyond by a god or gods. But despite the immense number of gods and goddesses who parade through the *Mahābhārata*, it is quickly apparent that the great bulk of them are little more than supernatural spirits who often meddle in human affairs for a wide variety of reasons, but without predetermining their course. In many ways, the heroes and sages of the Epic are more powerful and important than the ordinary gods; and the off-handed fashion in which the Epic redactors frequently treat the gods, and even laugh at them, surely speaks for itself. However, there are three great Gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, who are not laughed at. They are held responsible for creation, preservation and destruction of the triple-world. The difficulty, as we have seen, is that the creation is of a very special kind. Not only are all the inhabitants of the created triple-world interdependent and arranged in a strictly hierarchical fashion, but the creation itself is a particularly fragile construction. For reasons we have already considered, the great Gods build into the triple-world not just the forces of order and good but also the forces of disorder, chaos and evil. Fortunately, for the triple-world, the great Gods are ultimately committed to making good the deficiencies in their own creation, and uphold order and virtue. It is only through their constant intervention and guidance in the affairs of the triple-world that order and the ascendancy of *dharma* can be maintained.

However, it is interesting and significant that the degree of their predetermining activity differs according to how they are perceived. In the theological sections, the great Gods are conceived in a pantheistic sense as indeterminate essences, the ground of the universe and every being, that predetermine all actions; and in this way they guarantee the functioning of the triple-world. The effect for man is either to reduce him to the status of a controlled and powerless puppet, or to entirely compromise the idea of man as a separate and real entity let alone a free one. In the mythology and legends the great Gods are conceived of as thoroughly anthropomorphic beings who, it must be said, play the part of not always very vigilant guardians, being so preoccupied with their own concerns that the ~~the~~ triple-world is brought to the verge of ruin before they react. Nevertheless, they do always eventually react and through their commands and personal intervention they proceed to predetermine only the essential events that are necessary to preserve order.

The effect for man is to restrict his freedom, but not to exclude it. For our Epic mythologists, it certainly did not follow that just because God readily and frequently intervened in human affairs, man had no freedom and human action was meaningless.

More difficult to assess is the predetermining role of such personalised abstractions as the Placer, the Ordainer and the Ruler, who play very significant parts in the proceedings of the *Mahābhārata*. Whether, in any particular context, they are considered to be Vedic gods of old, independent divinities in their own right, epithets of the great Gods, or as impersonal fate thinly veiled, they are often portrayed as exercising a high degree of predetermining power in the affairs of the triple-world, and not seldom as determining all actions and events. This is especially the case where the context is one of misfortune, adversity or grief. Where these abstractions are apparent epithets for the great Gods, it is as if devotees, reluctant directly to blame their chosen conception of the divine, preferred to have recourse to a barely disguised epithet. Whatever the case, after examining from all angles the more extreme deterministic view, our Epic authors seem to find little favour with it. Draupadī's views are condemned as heretical. They are both destructive of *dharma* and blasphemous towards the Placer. It is argued that the Placer, far from acting capriciously, merely distributes the consequences of the acts of mortals. This, though, is one of the very few attempts in the *Mahābhārata* to reconcile the doctrine of karma with the supreme power of God. It is also surely not without significance that the main presenters of the view that all is pre-determined by the Placer are a woman (Draupadī) and a demon (Nāmuci). But the attention given to this view would suggest that for many it most satisfactorily explained their understanding and experience of the world around them.

The idea that the destiny of the individual is controlled from the beyond by the impersonal forces of fate and Time also features prominently in the *Mahābhārata*. Admittedly, given the imprecision in the terms used, it is not always possible to be certain in every circumstance whether we have a case of predestination, or fate pure and simple. Nevertheless, in many cases the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the fact of human bondage to outside forces, and the nature of the forces is clearly impersonal or is left largely indeterminate. The impersonal nature of these forces is most clearly and thoroughly indicated in the descriptions

of the power of Time. But, as we have seen, even with the common term *daiva* - an adjectival form of *deva* or god, which literally translates as 'the divine' - where the emphasis is on human bondage, the context leaves little doubt that what is meant is a force that is beyond human beings and that is independent of the control of a particular God, or the gods in general. In these cases, no deity can be said to appropriate the force, own it or be identical with it. We could, of course, wish that the Epic sages had chosen to explore more thoroughly the nature and origin of these outside impersonal forces; but this they do not do. Instead the emphasis is more on man's bondage. Perhaps this was a recognition that the forces of fate are by nature mysterious and beyond close definition.

We may conclude that belief in the power of impersonal fate was not extinguished - as might perhaps be expected - as the popularity of the great Gods rose. There can be no doubt that, as the Hindu tradition evolved, many of the older ideas concerning fate, chance and destiny were subordinated to the might of the great personal Gods, being incorporated as a manifestation of their all-encompassing power. The process is perhaps most immediately apparent with the conception of the Placer and Ordainer. The reason for this, or so the text would suggest, is that the vagaries of human existence - especially to do with death, destruction, monstrous misfortune, and so on - could be so overwhelming, that only an explanation in terms of the impersonal forces of fate and Time could be sufficiently satisfying. At heart, the *Mahābhārata*'s notions of fate would seem to be principally a projection of human fears and uncertainties. In such circumstances, while we find no evidence of the sort of cult of fate to be found in other cultures, the sound of the no doubt primordial ideas of fate and destiny¹ may still be heard - whatever the position achieved by the theistic Gods. In circumstances of crisis, the evidence of the *Mahābhārata* suggests the strength and tenacity in Indian society of deep-seated convictions regarding fate, chance and destiny.

From the evidence of the *Mahābhārata* it also emerges that fate could be conceived in quite different, and at times surprising, ways.

1) For an interesting - if speculative - article on the nature of Indo-Aryan religion, including the importance of fate, see O. Schröder, 'Aryan Religion', in R. Hastings (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol.11, pp.11-57. We of course know nothing of pre-Aryan Indian ideas of fate.

There is no one single concept of fate in the text. In some contexts it is inscrutable and purposeless, and in other instances it assumes a more moral dimension, favouring the good, and punishing the bad. The idea of fate and Time exhibiting a moral dimension may perhaps sound strange, but the text itself has no doubts. In other contexts, fate and Time (and more especially Time) are considered to be all-powerful and ineluctable, determining each and every event and action; but elsewhere they can be made favourable or even overcome with human effort and exertion. In at least one instance, the force of Time has been made the mechanism for the distribution of karmic consequences. But this is quite exceptional. Normally, the many references to fate and Time remain in a state of unresolved tension with the doctrine of karma. The theory of karma and notions of fate do share a common strong point in their ability to provide an explanation for the inexplicable, tragic and unexpected. But unlike the characters in the tale of the hunter and the snake, most Epic characters seem to have preferred their explanations in terms of fate and Time. The reason is not hard to seek. Whereas karma invited personal introspection to find the cause in past deeds, with fate the blame could be cast at the inscrutable beyond.

While the *Mahābhārata* may freely accept the importance of pre-destination and fate, it must be emphasised that unrestrained fatalism, or the notion that mortals are entirely controlled by inscrutable and inescapable forces from the beyond, and should conform their life accordingly, is a view that gains little approval or favour. And there is, of course, a world of difference between belief in fate and pre-destination, and acceptance of outright fatalism. This is perhaps most apparent in the discussions that we have analysed which consider the importance of fate and human effort, or fate, karma, and human effort, and conclude by finding a place for each. On the analogy of the peasant tending his field who was only too aware that a successful crop depended on the combination of his effort and outside forces beyond his control, in the Indian view acceptance of the power of external forces in mortal affairs did not always mean denial of the power of mortals to influence their own destiny. The debate was not conducted in either/or terms as tended to become the case in the Western tradition.

In various other ways, the authors of the *Mahābhārata* seem to be consciously intent on fostering a mental outlook that is diametrically opposed to that of outright fatalism. As we have seen, the *Mahābhārata*

is fond of aphorisms and didactic tales that uphold the importance of human effort and exertion, and at times even openly deride belief in fate. It also accepts the importance of human responsibility, again rejecting explanations in terms of fate and predestination. And it explicitly accepts the power of mortals to order the world around them and to control their own destiny through means of the sacrifice, austerities (*tapas*), knowledge and devotion. In the *Mahābhārata*, it is *tapas* especially that raises mortals to unparalleled heights of power, lording it over the ordinary gods in the triple-world, though never the great Gods. The fascination in Indian mythology with the mighty deeds of the great ṛṣis would seem especially to highlight the importance of power and control as ultimate values in Indian thought. Through the intentional cultivation of the power of *tapas*, the ṛṣi was able to turn the tables on the forces at large in the world that otherwise manipulate and move him, and that ultimately turn his life into suffering, misery and distress. The other-worldly *nivṛtti* ṛṣis, dismissing the importance and meaning of worldly life, draw upon their accumulated power to control, overcome, and finally escape earthly bondage. The more this-worldly *pravṛtti* ṛṣis, pursuing the four stages of life, use their accumulated power not to escape the hold of existence but to dominate, conquer and control it. In the mythology of the ṛṣis, the Epic authors seem intent on exploring how man can overcome the feeling that, thrown into a world that is indifferent and callous, his life is brief, powerless, and doomed. For in this mythology man can, with the necessary effort, garner the power that transforms him from an object of manipulation by outside forces to being the manipulator of these forces himself. Only the great Gods escape man's control. However, with the rise to importance of *bhakti* which is evident in the Epic, the trend is already there for the power pendulum to swing back more towards the divine with a corresponding diminution in the position of man; a fact which is very evident in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

While the author of the *Bhagavadgītā* is not directly concerned with the problem of the meaningfulness of human action, nevertheless what he does have to say is of importance. In part, this is because of the special position the *Gītā* came to occupy in the Hindu tradition, but also because it pulls together into one short and (relatively) tidy text many of the problems that are much more diffusely considered throughout the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, in many ways the *Bhagavadgītā* stands as a sort of professorial lecture on the remainder of the Epic. In this chapter,

we have presented a new argument that the efforts of previous authors to find the *Gītā*'s answer to the problem of fate and free-will are essentially misguided, for the *Gītā* offers various answers, all of which accept in varying degrees the importance of human effort and the ability of mortals to direct their own destiny. The author of the *Gītā*, we have argued, seems to have favoured the *bhakti* solution with its greater reliance on God's effort and correspondingly diminished reliance on human effort. Theoretically man was still capable of choosing and attaining salvation through his own unaided effort, but there was little purpose in pursuing this course for the struggle was so great and God's saving grace so readily available to those who offered their loving devotion. However, we have argued that the author of the *Gītā*, not without irony, effectively undermined his own preferred solution out of a desire to build up at all costs the position of his view of a personal God - this being a critical part of the *Gītā*'s answer to the contemporary crisis in the orthodox tradition.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of our analysis is the *Mahābhārata*'s obvious preparedness to give an airing to all possible solutions to the problem. While this is in keeping with the nature of the Epic, the problem, which ultimately concerns the relationship between man and the world, is by its very nature intractable, and certainly more productive of views than of conclusions. When considering the *Mahābhārata*'s approach, it is Milton's brilliant parody of the Western debate contained in his description of the intellectual pastimes of the fallen angels, that most readily comes to mind:

(they) reasoned high
Of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,
Fixed fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.¹

To be fair, though, the *Mahābhārata*'s debate is not entirely lost in a maze. Despite the very wide variety of views to be found in the *Mahābhārata* on the problem of fate and free-will, it is the consistent, albeit varying, emphasis placed by Indian thinkers upon the importance and meaningfulness of human effort and freedom that most stands out. Given Hinduism's

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1) *Paradise Lost*, 2.558-61 in J. Carey and A. Fowler (eds.) The Poems of John Milton.

general reputation for fatalism, it is a point of some importance. If we ask ourselves why this was so, the answer would seem to lie principally with the essential concern in Hindu culture for *mokṣa* and *dharma*, the ultimate values discussed above which effectively pre-disposed Hindu thinkers towards placing a high value upon power, control and freedom.

For Western thought, with its preference for systematic discussion and firm conclusions, the approach adopted by the *Mahābhārata* may well provide frustration and even irritation. But as one perceptive observer has noted of Indian mythology, it is the 'untrammelled variety and contradiction' that 'constitutes the peculiar charm and strength of the Hindu world-view'.¹ For their intended audience it is no doubt a virtue of the Epic thinkers that they contemplate the problem of man's relationship to the world more with the innocent, or even possibly naive, eye of the mythologist than the more strictly analytical approach of the philosopher. And for the historian of ideas, the result is an undeniably rich and fascinating mixture.

1) W.D. O'Flaherty, Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Īiva, p. 318.

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